The Numinous Gate: A Philosophico-Phenomenological Study of Wonder and Image Consciousness in the Fabulist Art of Varo and Borges

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THE NUMINOUS GATE: A PHILOSOPHICO-PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY
OF WONDER AND IMAGE CONSCIOUSNESS IN
THE FABULIST ART OF VARO AND BORGES

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Seré todos o nadie. Seré el otro
Que sin saberlo soy, el que ha mirado
Ese otro sueño, mi vigilia. La juzga,
Resignado y sonriente.

—Jorge Luis Borges
—“El sueño”

[I shall be all or no one. I shall be the other
I am without knowing it, he who has looked on
that other dream, my waking state. He weighs it up,
resigned and smiling.]

Personalmente, yo no me creo dotada de poderes especiales, sino más bien de una capacidad para ver rápidamente las relaciones de causa a efecto, y ello fuera de los límites ordinaries de la lógica corriente.

—Remedios Varo
—Cartas

[Personally, I do not think I am endowed with special powers, but rather an ability to quickly see the relationship between cause and effect beyond the current limits of ordinary logic.]
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ABSTRACT

Bob Kalivac Carroll

_The Numinous Gate: A Philosophico-Phenomenological Study of Wonder and Image Consciousness in the Fabulist Art of Varo and Borges_

This study investigates the roles of wonder and a sensibility to “the numinous” in the work of Spanish-Mexican painter Remedios Varo and Argentine writer and poet Jorge Luis Borges, each of whom created fabulist narratives, visual and literary respectively. An investigation of wonder as a distinctly “disruptive” universal phenomenon and its accompanying “not-knowing” and “self-forgetting” qualities serve as an entryway for engaging, contemplating and depicting the infinitely shifting terrain that marks the invisibility of the numinous. Eastern approaches to understanding the variations and fluctuations of aesthetic consciousness might describe this theme as a “gateless gate.” Thus European and Asian thought are combined to support the argument that Varo and Borges’s irrealistic narratives challenge any immutable account of truth and reality in art. The proposal herein is that truth and reality are ultimately indefinable aspects of art. Grounding this study in a philosophico-phenomenological orientation by combining a methodology rooted in Edmund Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology with aesthetically oriented philosophical commentary by other thinkers allows the seemingly amorphous and paradoxical roles of subjectivity and spiritual consciousness in modern art and aesthetics to be more directly examined and understood. That the dynamic of the artist-philosopher fuels an impulse to make visible through art the invisibility of what
Rudolf Otto called “the numinous” reflects how, as Remedios Varo asserted, art is made “as a way of communicating the incommunicable,” thus bringing meaning to what Borges describes as “the overwhelming disorder of the real world.” The seminal roles of subjectivity—the decentering of the subject, Husserlian transcendental subjectivity and intersubjectivity, and intertextual philosophical assessments of subjectivity— are all used to explore Borges’s literary and Varo’s visual storytelling and their respective searches for truth and reality.
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Introduction—Communicating the Incommunicable

This study investigates the interwoven roles of the numinous, wonder, and image consciousness in the work of Spanish-Mexican painter Remedios Varo and Argentine writer and poet Jorge Luis Borges, both of whom created narratives—visual and literary respectfully—of what is described here as irreal fabulism. Explicating Varo and Borges’s irreal fabulist storytelling magnifies the broader thematic focus of the study. Similarly, considering the art of Varo and Borges as being rooted in wonder opens an investigative window for viewing how a sensibility to what Rudolf Otto termed “the numinous” lends itself to an aesthetically inspired nonlinear search of mystery. Grounding this investigation in a philosophico-phenomenological orientation allows the seemingly amorphous and paradoxical role of spiritual consciousness in art and aesthetics to be more directly examined and understood.

However, a necessary interjection here is that because the word “spiritual” is so replete with multiple connotative meanings, the broader definition inherent in “the numinous” is utilized because it enfields spirituality as well as other topics that are seemingly less spiritual but nonetheless related to mystery or the unknown. These additional meanings of the numinous will be examined ahead.

Similarly, employing a methodology inspired by Edmund Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology, and especially his theories of epoché, image
consciousness (*Bildbewußteil*, also translated as “depicting consciousness”), fantasy or imagination, and memory, yields a more logical and conceptual rendering of the ineffable nature of the proposed theme. Essentially, this study argues that art is rooted in an impulse to disclose or make visible the invisibility of numinous presence, or as Remedios Varo put it, art can serve as “a way of communicating the incommunicable” (Elizondo 216), thus bringing meaning to what Borges describes as “the overwhelming disorder of the real world” (*Selected Non-Fictions* 81). Related topics include intertextualities (both conceptually driven discursive and perceptually fueled visual versions), and a consideration of how the root source of wonder in the specific cases of Varo and Borges serves the dynamic of the artist-philosopher.

Examining the creative processes of Remedios Varo and Jorge Luis Borges allows the multifarious and interwoven topics of irreal fabulist storytelling, wonder, the numinous, and image consciousness to be elucidated and presented via a consolidated examination, while a philosophico-phenomenological orientation allows plurality to be partnered with congruity. In other words, the manifold topics and subtopics that surface here can be illustrated in the literary art of Borges and the visual art of Varo, even though this is neither an exhaustive study nor a survey of their work. While both of these artists respond aesthetically to a sensibility to the numinous in his or her distinctive fashion, Borges’ philosophically and intertextually oriented work is clearly different from Varo’s representational magical and mystical paintings. Varo and Borges also emphasize autobiographical elements in different ways, as will be seen. Nonetheless, their common orientation to creativity involves an
amalgamation of wonder and an impulse to seek, elucidate, and somehow represent the numinous via irreal fabulist art.

What is more challenging is to explicate the evidence of sensibility in these two artists and the other artists referenced herein—from Kandinsky to Duchamp and beyond—to a common numinous presence, one that exists prior to any subjective filtering. While subjectivity is central here, it is not a conventional or psychological study of individual subjectivity per se. Instead, Husserlian transcendental subjectivity and intersubjectivity concepts, as well as other theories about subjectivity and creativity, are referenced. For example, the writings of Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, French novelist and philosopher Georges Bataille, and German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, among others, are referenced in regards to aesthetically oriented metaphysical concepts and issues, and to address the paradoxes and conundrums inherent in subjectivity.

The Chapters

Specific topics and issues are explored to explicate the multi-thematic territory described above, beginning with Chapter One—Phenomenological: A Husserlian Methodology, which establishes the methodological means used to elucidate relevant thematic territories. While that chapter aims primarily at establishing the methodological means inherent in Husserlian phenomenological concepts such as epoché, intersubjectivity, image consciousness, and other tools used for explicating more clearly topics related to mystery, there are additional non-Husserlian concepts that are relevant and very useful as well.
Chapter Two—Wonder as Disruption: Subjectivity and Not-knowing, besides investigating the phenomenon of wonder itself, argues that wonder undermines various presumptions about subjectivity and conceptual thinking, as well as specific presuppositions about life and the world—presumptions rooted in scientific materialism and conventionally linear ways of knowing. Wonder is closely related to the topic in Chapter Three—The Numinous, which addresses a topic that—at least in phenomenological and philosophical terms, and to some extent in contemporary sociopolitical thought—is taboo. There are various reasons for this unspoken prohibition against studying the numinous in contemporary aesthetics and philosophy, the most salient of those reasons being the question of how can one possibly address (beyond religious belief and New Age notions) what is by its very nature seemingly \textit{not} addressable. Because the numinous is invisible and a highly subjective, seemingly enigmatic experience, one naturally is puzzled as to how it might be examined and understood objectively as a universal element of life and reality. Yet this is also a primary reason why this kind of investigation can be valuable—the numinous is rarely examined in the conceptual and discursive worlds of contemporary philosophy. There remains a tendency to either ignore topics like wonder, the numinous, and ecstasy, or to reassign them to other fields such as religious studies or psychology. In fact, it is not unusual for contemporary thinkers to categorize wonder and the numinous as banal topics in the sense that they are unsuited for objective philosophical studies and consequently are irrelevant in contemporary thought and art theory.
That attitude is not the case here. In regards to mystery and the invisible, part of this study’s purpose is to argue against contemporary presumptions that such ineffable topics are automatically invalid ideas impenetrable to scholarly investigation. This inquiry proposes and argues that such an understanding is indeed possible even if these topics ultimately appear to be apodictic, and that such an explication is a valid philosophical project. This last point is asserted with a caveat—merely presuming the numinous is apodictic is not enough. While part of the answer to this conundrum is explicated in the chapter on wonder, what is required is more than a neatly packaged answer rooted in conjecture and opinion. Just as significant as eschewing any pat answer in regards to challenging the unspoken prohibition described above is to formulate the right questions without philosophical, theoretical, theological or personal presuppositions. A failure to bracket out presuppositions of any kind places this investigation (and in fact any philosophical investigation) in jeopardy of becoming something less than what it is or what it intends to be. To burden something as critical and far-reaching as philosophical investigation with presuppositional and thus possibly invalid understanding, which is to say possible misunderstanding, is to place philosophy itself in the precarious position of becoming yet another belief system. The unconscious motive to undermine philosophical discourse by converting it to a belief system must not be ignored; it must be bracketed out. Open-mindedness is understood to be more than a cultural or religious automaticity since what is required is an immaculately constituted examination and exegesis. Thus the approach here is to utilize scholarly work for a philosophical examination of what has frequently been avoided, ignored or dismissed.
Chapter Four—Seeking the Numinous in Modern Art may at first seem superfluous, given that numerous artists besides Varo and Borges are referenced. Yet this chapter is essential in that it establishes a broad grounding of evidence that many modern artist-philosophers confronted and attempted to communicate through aesthetic motifs, artistic styles, and leitmotifs such as wonder, a sensibility to the numinous, and ecstatic expression, a search for a numinous gateway. The purpose of this chapter, then, is to establish with clarity and via historical evidence that an artistic attraction to wonder and the numinous, while not universal, is nonetheless much broader than the work of the two artists emphasized in this particular thesis. And that is possible. Art commentaries of numerous modern artists and writers besides Varo and Borges have explored various expressions of this issue. Those art commentaries and the artworks viewed in this chapter add substance to the overall thematic purport of this study. In other words, Chapter Four helps to provide evidence within an investigational framework that can be described as a specific thematic geography, one that takes into account the impulse to seek the numinous in artistic creativity, thus accentuating how such themes were acceptable prior to unconscious contemporary (and in some cases emphatically and calculatedly conscious) prohibitions. It is essential to show that an artistic sensibility to and a seeking for the numinous has not been restricted to only a few seemingly eccentric artists, but was, especially before postmodernist thought and aesthetics, widespread. Evidence is also presented in this chapter that some postmodernist and contemporary artists have continued to demonstrate this sensibility to and search for the numinous.

Chapter Five—Philosophico: An Intertextual Orientation to Aesthetic
Thinkers continues to examine the validity of this thematic territory. A major section, for example, of Arthur Schopenhauer’s masterpiece *The World as Will and Presentation (Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung)*—“Third Book: The Platonic Idea: The Object of Art” explicates an essential subtopic here via his writing and thought. Schopenhauer was the first major western philosopher to acknowledge and incorporate in any substantial way non-Eurocentric concepts and forms of understanding.

Similarly, the concept of carnivalesque presented by Russian thinker Mikhail Bakhtin, and his advocacy of “art for life’s sake,” is important when applied to Borges and Varo. These two artists’ uses of irrealist fabulism—terms explicated in more detail ahead—elucidate and are elucidated by Bakhtin’s theme of the carnivalesque. The writings of Borges and paintings of Varo both signal a life-positive orientation to the human being, one that affirms a sensibility of art for life’s sake. Bakhtin presents the carnivalesque as a merging of the sacred with the irreligious or profane, inspiring an anti-authoritarian, contrarian celebration of life and art, a style of presentation relevant to the work of Borges and Varo. A liberating attitude towards the humor and the grotesque is inherent in the carnivalesque, just as humor is inherent in the artist-philosopher dynamic fueling the creativity of Varo and Borges. Both artists immerse, to some extent, their work in popular culture, while simultaneously challenging, through the carnivalesque and other means, uninspected categorical presumptions and cultural limitations of what only appears to be a stabilized society. Thus this chapter utilizes, often in an intertextual context, the work of Schopenhauer, Plato, Kant, Bakhtin, Bataille and other thinkers whose ideas are
specifically relevant to wonder, the numinous, image consciousness, and the various aspects of subjectivity.

Chapter Six—Art for Life: Varo and Borges as Artist-Philosophers brings the previous chapters together to bear more directly on the work of these two artists. Working from the already established historical and aesthetic ground established in Chapter Four about the search for the numinous in modern art, the unique and what is described by the title of Rick O’Rawe’s study of *The Unorthodox Spiritualities of Jorge Luis Borges and Remedios Varo* are disclosed and elucidated. The relevance of themes and topics introduced in the first five chapters—Husserlian phenomenology, wonder as disruption, the numinous, the artistic seeking of the numinous, or mystery, and multifarious philosophy of art concepts—emerges again in Chapter Six to illustrate in artistic terms within the artist-philosopher dynamic what was philosophically and aesthetically explicated earlier.

**The Interrelatedness of Not-knowing, Ecstasy, Self-forgetting**

Some significant (and to some extent precursory) inquiries underlie the explication of the primary themes in the chapters described above. While most of these subtopics will be addressed in the relevant chapters themselves (such as, for example, the phenomenological Husserlian terms intentionality, givenness, and representation in Chapter One), a few are relevant throughout all the chapters. These include knowing and not-knowing, ecstasy, self-forgetting, chance, invisibility, intuitive perception, and performance-assisted subjective process. However, only a few need to be introduced immediately.

It is necessary, for example, to ask what knowledge is, or exactly how do we
know something to be true? This is more complex than one might initially presume. One of the most direct answers to the question of how can we know something to be true requires an address of what we do not know, and certainly the “answer” Socrates offers in Plato’s *Theaetetus* reveals a description of unknowing or not-knowing that is relevant here. In his discussion with the young Theaetetus, Socrates notes that a “strange occurrence” surfaces in an attempt to understand or define knowledge. This occurrence, Socrates asserts, is that “an interchange of pieces of knowledge should ever turn out to be a false judgement” (Plato, *Theaetetus*, 91). When Theaetetus asks for clarification about this assertion, Socrates goes on to say:

First of all, that someone who has knowledge of something should be ignorant of that very thing, not through ignorance, but because of his own knowledge; and second, that he should judge that thing to be something else, and something else to be that thing—surely it’s very unreasonable? That, when knowledge has come to be present in it, the mind should know nothing, and be ignorant of everything? Because according to that argument, there’s nothing to stop even ignorance making one know something, or blindness making one see, if even knowledge can sometimes make one ignorant (91-92).

Besides “blindness making one see” being a profound statement, it is more importantly a relevant one. Recalling the famous statement by Socrates in Plato’s *Apology* is also useful:

When I left him, I reasoned thus with myself: I am wiser than this man, for neither of us appears to know anything great and good; but he
fancies he knows something, although he knows nothing; whereas I, as I do not know anything, so I do not fancy I do. In this trifling particular, then, I appear to be wiser than he, because I do not fancy I know what I do not know (Plato, *Six Great Dialogues*, 4-5).  

Although wonder and not-knowing are fully explicated in Chapter Two, this seeking to understand the nature and validity of knowledge demands some explanation of how an association between wonder and not-knowing surfaces. The sense of wonder is acknowledged in the philosophies of both Plato and Aristotle, though in distinct ways. As Aristotle wrote in the *Metaphysics*, “For it is owing to their wonder that men both now begin and at first began to philosophize” (Vasalou, “Wonder” 51). In her essay “Wonder and the Beginning of Philosophy in Plato,” Sylvana Chrysakopoulou writes, “No wonder that Socrates in the *Theaetetus* begins the genealogy of philosophy with “wonder”— a highly ecstatic yet profoundly disorienting state of consciousness arising when experiencing the unfamiliar as strangely familiar and vice versa, or when unexpected attraction for the unknown triggers memories of a life never lived” (89). Later, Chrysakopoulou examines the extended implications of Greek wonder and the beginnings of philosophy: “To Socrates, wonder is a ‘passion,’ a *state* to which the soul is subjected—in accordance with the meaning of *pathos* in ancient Greek. Although *thauma* [wonder] is described as a malady, a kind of malaise that captures the soul all of a sudden, wonder is not only welcome, but also necessary to begin philosophizing” (94).

Chrysakopoulou goes on to propose that understanding begins with ignorance, not with knowledge, and that this may well include a sense of disorientation. At the
same time, *thauma* also leads to intellectual illumination, as when the first messenger of the Greek gods, Iris, appears “like an iridescent vision through the dark mists of the soul’s ignorance” (95), a beginning principle in seeking wisdom, as in a rainbow or *archê* “bridging over philosophy” (95). It is Plato’s emphasis on wonder as “the beginning of philosophizing as a divine phenomenon, a sort of epiphany, related to the sight of divine beauty” (95) that sets off the Platonic version of wonder from Aristotle’s more scientific observation of wonder as a starting point.

The moment of unfamiliarity, of mystery or not-knowing occurs—as contemporary phenomenological scholar Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei argues in *The Ecstatic Quotidian: Phenomenological Sightings in Modern Art and Literature*—against the background of daily life experience:

The “quotidian” is the sense of life built up in daily experience by everyday habits, by the sedimentation of ordinary expectation of the world, but also by the tensions between the regularity of the familiar and necessary innovation. The quotidian is that background in contrast to which new discoveries emerge and we are surprised; and more pointedly, it is a necessary condition for surprise, the regularity in contrast to which something new and unexpected occurs.

Unfamiliarity, wonder, and mysteriousness are both embedded in and turnings-away from familiarity and predictability. These turnings-away, our stepping outside of the ordinary, do not leave it behind, but draw energy and vivacity from this deviation (Gosetti-Ferencei 1).

While the experience of wonder may perhaps be less likely to arise...
spontaneously with adults, who are burdened, in a sense, with a plethora of presuppositional knowledge, it is nonetheless available over and against a contextual disruption of the quotidian.

The primary point is that wonder is an essential factor in life, in philosophy, in art and in the philosophy of art, and that wonder includes an experience of not-knowing. As will be seen, wonder and not-knowing are also connected to art for life’s sake. In fact, prior to art and scholarship (although related to both) is the role of wonder in humankind’s collective experience of knowing and not-knowing. The phenomenon of wonder reflects a philosophical and aesthetic significance greater than any presumption of fairytale “make believe” entertainment. While Varo and Borges were chosen specifically because they do not dismiss mystery and the invisible as impenetrable, but acknowledge and attempt to excavate the phenomenon through their art, Gossetti-Ferencei’s point above about “unfamiliarity, wonder, and mysteriousness” (1) signals, among other issues, that the proposal here of wonder and not-knowing is not restricted to the oeuvres of Borges and Varo. Bataille, for example, not only discusses “nonknowledge” and ecstasy in art; he discusses the connection between nonknowledge and topics like torture, pain, pornography, and death. To Bataille, nonknowledge opens doorways:

On entering into nonknowledge, I know I erase the figures from the blackboard. But the obscurity that falls in this way isn’t that of annihilation, it is not even the “night when all cows are black.” It is the enjoyment [jouissance] of the night. It is only slow death, death that it is possible to enjoy. And I am learning, slowly, that the death at work
in me wasn’t missing only from my knowledge, but also from the depths of my joy. I learn this only in order to die. I know that without this annihilation already within my thought, my thought would be servile babble, and I will not know my ultimate thought as it is the death of thought (*Unfinished System of Nonknowledge* 204).

That Bataille’s approach is that of the artist-philosopher and not simply the thinker becomes evident throughout his writings, as when he states, “The death of thought is the voluptuous orgy that prepares death, the festival held in the house of the dead” (204). Bataille’s great value is that he passionately enters the darkness of mystery, and even provides for himself an intimate examination of evil, in order to access ecstatic joy and a kind of freedom that engenders artistic integrity that extends his art and his life beyond the limitations of linear discursive thought. Nor is the festival he speaks of above so distant or different from the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, with its feast animated within the contrarian trope.

That said, ample evidence exists that both Borges and Varo are well aware of the implications and value of mystery, or the numinous, and of not-knowing. Among the writings of Borges is an excerpt from his 1928 “The Language of the Argentines” (*El idioma de los argentinos*) in which he describes an experience that occurred as he arrived at a certain street corner in the Barracas district, a barrio of Buenos Aires. Before reaching that corner in his anecdote, Borges reflects on his feelings and state of consciousness during his evening walk that led up to this incident.

I did not wish to have a set destination, I followed a random course, as much as possible; I accepted, with no conscious prejudice other than
avoiding the avenues or wide streets, the most obscure invitations of chance. But a kind of familiar gravitation drew me toward certain sections I shall always remember, for they arouse in me a kind of reverence, I am not speaking of the precise environment of my childhood, my own neighborhood, but of the still mysterious fringe area beyond it, which I have possessed completely in words and but little in reality, an area that is familiar and mythological at the same time. The opposite of the known—its wrong side, so to speak—are those streets to me, almost as completely hidden as the buried foundation of our house or our invisible skeleton (Kodama xiv).

Some of the language in Borges’ anecdote accentuates and confirms the primary purpose of this study, which is to investigate what is invisible and thus normally hidden from consciousness but nonetheless existing on the “mysterious fringe area beyond it” (Kodama xiv). Mystery can be vaguely threatening yet still attractive partly because it is not known, as reflected in Borges’s description of the Buenos Aires streets.

Acknowledging and exploring the parameters of mystery in art also becomes evident in the paintings of Remedios Varo. While describing one of the thematic sections of the exhibition The Magic of Remedios Varo, the first retrospective show in 2000 of Remedios Varo’s art in the United States, exhibition curator Luis-Martin Lozano referenced the painting Exploración de las Fuentes del río Orinoco (fig. 1):

The second thematic nucleus, entitled “In Search of other Dimensions: The Conjunction of Magic Forces,” examines one of the
conceptual constants Varo developed throughout her career: the permanent search for new metaphysical dimensions within the two-dimensional space of painting. Her characters assume a Platonic attitude of meditation and explore inwardly, searching for the balance between yin and yang; or they travel in a continuous and frantic exploration of the analogous mountains or the dark waters of the afterworld. They are untiring travelers who reach the miasma of the Orinoco River in search of the primordial origin of all oracles. These travelers often go into occult dimensions, using fantastic means of locomotion to traverse winding roads and labyrinthian canals. Always clandestine, they discover the secret passageways of walls and cathedrals, searching for answers to the mysteries of the universe (Lozano 45).

Fig. 1. Remedios Varo. *Exploration of the Sources of the Orinoco River (Exploración de las Fuentes del rio Orinoco)*, 1959. Oil on canvas, 44 x 39.5 cm., private collection.
However, the approach herein is not to examine the occult per se, although varieties of occultism, magic, mysticism, and related topics surface from time to time within the philosophical and aesthetic themes of the study. Wonder, the numinous, and fabulist storytelling, on the other hand, are essential topics here. Extending the metaphor of search shown in Varo’s *Exploration of the Sources of the Orinoco River*, one might say (at the risk of oversimplifying the labyrinthine aesthetics of the artists studied here) that Varo and Borges are explorers attempting through their fabulist storytelling to locate the sources of the river the artists themselves are already immersed in, the immense flow of existential, aesthetic consciousness. While wonder itself is a kind of interruption or a temporary experience universally familiar to every human being, in artists wonder can also fuel a creative dynamic.

For example, this phenomenon of not-knowing is central to an anecdote told by a pioneer of nonobjective abstraction, Wassily Kandinsky. Among the influences and experiences fueling Wassily Kandinsky’s artistic journey into non-objective abstract painting is a 1908 anecdote told by the artist:

Much later, after my arrival in Munich, I was enchanted on one occasion by an unexpected spectacle that confronted me in my studio. It was the hour when dusk draws in. I returned home with my painting box having finished a study, still dreamy and absorbed in the work I had completed, and suddenly saw an indescribably beautiful picture, pervaded by an inner glow. At first, I stopped short and then quickly approached this mysterious picture, on which I could discern only forms and colors and whose content was incomprehensible. At once, I
discovered the key to the puzzle: it was a picture I had painted, standing on its side against the wall. The next day, I tried to recreate my impression of the picture from the previous evening by daylight. I only half succeeded, however; even on its side, I constantly recognized objects, and the fine bloom of dusk was missing. Now I could see clearly that objects harmed my pictures (*Kandinsky: Complete Writings*, 369-370).\textsuperscript{13}

Kandinsky’s intense interest in the spiritual in art\textsuperscript{14} and his movement towards non-objective abstraction,\textsuperscript{15} when combined with this moment of perceptual not-knowing or mystery in consciousness, illustrates an aspect of the phenomenon of wonder. Not-knowing is, in fact, inherently related to subjectivity, the subject-object dichotomy, and perception in a particularly phenomenological way, as will be seen in the chapter on Husserlian transcendental phenomenology.

A more recent example of art-making and the roles of wonder and not-knowing are evident in both the content and title of Lawrence Weschler’s book on contemporary American installation artist Robert Irwin, *Seeing is Forgetting the name of the Thing One Sees: Over Thirty Years of Conversations with Robert Irwin*. The title is related to a line attributed to the French poet-philosopher Paul Valéry, that “to see is to forget the name of the thing one sees” (Weschler 207). That artists are acutely sensitive to wonder is echoed in this anecdote about Irwin:

During the early seventies, when Robert Irwin was on the road a lot, visiting art schools and chatting with students, he was proffered an honorary doctorate by the San Francisco Art Institute. The school’s
graduation ceremony that year took place in an outdoor courtyard on a sunny, breezy afternoon, sparkling clear. Irwin approached the podium and began, “I wasn’t going to accept this degree, except it occurred to me that unless I did I wasn’t going to be able to say that.” He paused, waiting as the mild laughter eddied. “All I want to say,” he continued, “is that the wonder is still there.” Whereupon, he simply walked away (Weschler vii).

It should be noted that this anecdote is not presented to support an argument that scholarship and a philosophical understanding of knowledge are irrelevant to art. On the contrary, the argument here is that the phenomena of not-knowing and unknowing inherent in the experience of wonder are, as in the quotidian experience of ecstasy, significantly important elements in any investigation of knowledge.

In fact, Chapter Six—Art as Life: Varo and Borges as Artist-Philosophers considers how not-knowing or unknowing in Borges and Varo affects the dynamic that refines and redefines the artist as theorist or philosopher. As the chapters ahead unfold, it is useful to remember that the thematic orientation here is not to establish a theological, philosophical, or any other kind of “belief” system characterized by presuppositional knowledge. Any attempt to establish a presuppositional element must be rigorously explicated, illustrated, and documented with a body of genuine evidence that can authenticate such an argument, which is why Edmund Husserl’s meticulously unfeigned scholarship is, despite some difficulties, such an invaluable resource for elucidating this topic.

Sylvana Chrysakopoulou’s description above (pages 10-11) of Socrates’s
wonder as a kind of epiphany and a highly ecstatic state signals another element to be incorporated into the consideration of the numinous and wonder—ecstasy.

It should also be noted here that “epiphany” does have a relationship to ecstasy, although epiphany, most frequently defined as divine appearance (“epiphany, n.2.”) and ecstasy, defined as a state of being “beside oneself” in astonishment, fear or passion (“ecstasy, n. 1”) are not synonymous, although other definitions of ecstasy reflect how ecstasy amalgamates epiphany into itself as “the state of rapture in which the body was supposed to become incapable of sensation, while the soul was engaged in the contemplation of divine things” (“ecstasy, n. 3a). Another definition of ecstasy is as a state of consciousness beyond conceptual thinking as “an exalted state of feeling which engrosses the mind to the exclusion of thought” (“ecstasy, n. 4a”). This last definition of ecstasy is one especially relevant to the sense of not-knowing or unknowing that is significant to the present study, as is the etymology entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary* entry of ecstasy:

The classical senses of ἔκστασις [ecstasy] are ‘insanity’ and ‘bewilderment’; but in late Greek the etymological meaning received another application, viz., ‘withdrawal of the soul from the body, mystic or prophetic trance’; hence in later medical writers the word is used for trance, etc., generally. Both the classical and post-classical senses came into the modern languages, and in the present fig. uses they seem to be blended (“ecstasy, n.” etymology).

Although the experience of ecstasy, or stepping outside of oneself (what one conventionally considers to be oneself), appears—at least superficially—to be more
of a psychological or theological topic than a philosophical one, this dissertation challenges that presumption along with other philosophical presuppositions. In a certain sense, a primary use of art is a kind of aesthetic ecstasy in which not-knowing and self-forgetting occurs, albeit temporarily. While clearly there are other uses of art, in the present context of wonder and seeking the numinous, the experience of ecstasy is a frequently related aspect.

To that end, Bataille’s work is accentuated, although not as a principle theme. His passionate references to and elucidations of the roles of mysticism, the sacred, and ecstasy—albeit in a more uniquely oblique fashion than that utilized by many philosophers, theologians, and artists—serve to illustrate how an artist-philosopher may, via a highly emotive intellectual approach, present those topics. Furthermore, if one considers Bataille's work in an intertextual context, the highly emotive orientation to his work can be understood to be an expression of the intensely emotional state of Gefühl, a concept and phenomenon that will be explicated farther ahead.

The point here is that the multifarious topical territory explicated throughout this study are not a group of unrelated topics. What is intended is an exploration of a single fabric, so to speak, a multi-colored, interwoven work, as reflected in the study’s title. That said, this work necessarily raises the question of principal themes—or what the study is about chapter by chapter, even if every chapter also examines numerous interrelated topics.

Along with ecstasy, the subtopic of self-forgetting is used in several chapters, especially to clarify some of the characteristics of wonder as disruption and some
Husserlian concepts. It needs to be understood, however, that there is nothing negative or psychologically debilitating about self-forgetting as used in the present context; what is being discussed is not the tragic suffering inherent in Alzheimer’s Disease or various unfortunate psychotic manifestations studied in psychiatry, nor does the usage here include the admirable altruistic and sometimes religious contexts of forgetting about oneself and one’s personal welfare in order to serve or help others. Self-forgetting here is used in an explication of consciousness, including states of so-called alternative and altered states of consciousness. Various states of consciousness have long been included in Eastern philosophical studies, but less in Occidental studies. Part of this study’s purpose is to readjust that imbalance.

Obviously, the experience of self-forgetting has several definitions and usages, but in the present context this phenomenon is referenced because it sometimes (not always) accompanies wonder and a sensibility to the numinous, and is almost always closely related to ecstasy, or the temporary experience of stepping outside of one’s usual sense of separative self-identification.

How are these themes—primary and secondary—related to the work of Borges and Varo? The most accurate description of Borges and Varo might be to simply say that both are—primarily by virtue of his or her art, but also in other ways in their respective lives—storytellers, or fabulists. This will be explored in more detail in Chapter Six. Here it is enough to point out that while in the 15th century a “fabulist” was a title for a professional storyteller, the definition now is simply “one who relates fables or legends; a composer of apolologies” ("fabulist, n."). An apologue is a synonym for a fable, but usually is understood to be an allegorical story, one
usually intended to serve a moral purpose ("apologue, n."). While the term fabulist has often been applied to Borges, Remedios Varo has more often been called a surrealist. Here, however, both Borges and Varo will be referred to as fabulist storytellers.

When primary themes along with accompanying secondary themes come together and congeal as a central thematic unity, what is most apparent is that Borges and Varo are, as artists, like explorers repeatedly entering an unknown forest to locate what they can sense but cannot see. In a more literal sense, the forest is consciousness and Borges and Varo are exploring consciousness via their fabulist art-making. For Varo, the cliché that every picture tells a story is accurate, and the visual story she tells is an exploration of this forest of consciousness. For Borges, every story yields a literary picture, or rather a series of narrative pictures, about the forest and its history, about the dense tangles of the forest of consciousness, about the explorers who preceded his own exploration, as well as those who will follow him. How these two artists enter the forest, what they see, and how they report their sightings via their art becomes central to this investigation.
Chapter One—Husserlian Phenomenological Methodology

Using some selected elements of Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology to explicate the art of Varo and Borges may seem less than pragmatic given the contrast between Husserl’s style of research and thought over against the work of these two artists, who were metaphorically described in the introduction as explorers of a forest of consciousness searching for the numinous. However, there are both practical and philosophical reasons for using what can be described as a Husserlian methodology here, even though this study makes no claims to being a detailed exegesis or exhaustive exploration of Edmund Husserl’s lifetime of work. The inventive and irrerealistic literary and visual narratives of these two fabulists demand an investigative means that can balance and ground those narratives in a clarifying philosophical language, one that admits conceptual thought about what seems at times to be beyond the reach of conceptual thinking. In fact, even acknowledging the challenge to investigating, assimilating, and critiquing the art and aesthetic of Borges and Varo reflects the relevance of choosing Husserl’s phenomenology as a grounded methodological means of addressing that challenge.

Given the irreal nature of both Borges and Varo’s art, an orientation rooted in analytical philosophy is unlikely to provide a philosophical language that can effectively explore (without undermining, marginalizing, or dismissing) an investigation of mystery. Although an occasional point may be best considered via a thinker associated with the analytic tradition, or with the precursors to logical positivism (Ludwig Wittgenstein and Bertrand Russell come to mind), the avenues
developed over the history of what is called continental philosophy are more promising. Specifically, phenomenology offers the strongest possibility of articulating and explicating the complex aesthetic elements germane to the work of Borges and Varo. The potential of phenomenological thought for investigating the primary themes herein eventually leads—via a refined phenomenological root specificity—to the decades of pioneering work of Edmund Husserl and the transcendental phenomenology he initiated and developed. In a sense, Husserl’s phenomenology offers perhaps the most analytical and logical methodology available in the continental tradition, which also points to why Husserlian approaches are increasingly utilized by various scientific and other fields, from mathematics to cognitive science.19

One must remember that Husserl’s earliest work focused on mathematics and psychology, and that among his earliest seminal work is his 1900-1901 Logical Investigations.20 That approach to understanding eventually proved inadequate for Husserl. This study primarily references and utilizes work subsequent to what has been described as Husserl’s “transcendental turn” after his 1913 Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology.21 A volume frequently referenced here is Phantasy, Image Consciousness, and Memory (1898-1925), a posthumous collection of Husserl’s work (a translation of Husserliana XXIII) on representational consciousness that is important in this study for several reasons, but especially because it addresses Husserlian explications of fantasy and especially image consciousness—the awareness in a person looking at a painting or a photograph, reading a novel or story, or attending a dance, theatre, or musical event and how that
awareness is related to art and aesthetics. Those writings collected in *Phantasy, Image Consciousness, and Memory* (1898-1925) are of direct significance here because fantasy, image consciousness, memory, time, and related Husserlian topics also represent elements in the work of Varo and Borges. While Husserl did hope to publish a single book on systematic presentation of perception, phantasy, and time consciousness, the book was not published in his lifetime. However, Husserl created courses with notes and wrote sketches addressing the topics (Brough, “Translator’s Introduction” XXIX-XXX).

Focusing on Husserl’s work uncovers a somewhat peripheral question. If phenomenology is the selected means for explicating primary themes such as wonder and the numinous, as well as image consciousness, fantasy, and memory in the fabulist art of Varo and Borges, why not utilize instead the concepts of some of Husserl’s more famous and decidedly more art-oriented students or thinkers—scholars who were influenced by Husserl, such as Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, Derrida, Levinas or others? To use one of the systems devised by those individuals seems sensible, especially since most of those thinkers established more detailed philosophies of art, or what we might describe, in some cases, as aesthetic systems, than did Husserl.

While the work of some of the thinkers named above will be utilized at times to address specific points, Husserlian phenomenology is established as the primary working methodology throughout because it was Husserl who presented a working methodology first before scholars like Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Levinas developed their own methodologies based on but stretched beyond Husserlian
transcendental phenomenology. In other words, besides resourcing the book of Husserlian thought that most directly addresses the topics of this study,\textsuperscript{23} the rationale in choosing Husserlian transcendental phenomenology has been that while the individual philosophers named above were highly creative and in some individual ways original thinkers, it was Husserl’s decades of original and innovative work that served as the initial foundation for each of those philosophers. Husserl’s demanding search for evidence and certitude, his great integrity and willingness to admit his own errors and shifts in thinking, and his passionate and obstinate drive to establish a scientifically rigorous means for investigating perception and knowledge, the phenomenon of this world, subjectivity and other issues, lends to this study a means of articulating more clearly the investigation of phenomena that are generally considered to be too ungrounded or too fanciful to yield to philosophical articulation or analysis.

Husserl, who did not claim to have created an aesthetic or even a philosophical \textit{system} per se, did create an immaculately designed \textit{method} of investigation:

\begin{quote}
Although it is true to say that, for Husserl, the subject matter of philosophy dictates the phenomenological method, it would be a mistake to see in this an indication that he is advocating a philosophical system. Husserl was a systematic thinker, but anything but an advocate of a system. What he called for was a unified method of approach to each philosophical problem in order to clarify and
validate significant concepts, but this did not mean the interweaving of
c-cepts into one systematic whole (Lauer xiv).

Nonetheless, Husserl did interweave many of his concepts in the sense that
one concept or action may be inherently linked to or conjoined with another, not in
order to create a system of thought, but to refine his investigative methodology. For
Husserl, since the method is the message, so to speak, his partial affinity for a
Cartesian approach to investigation is emphasized (Lauer xix).24

Descartes does influence Husserl. In fact, in his *Cartesian Meditations*,25
Husserl describes how his transcendental phenomenology is both distinct from and
similar to the Cartesian approach. This will be examined more closely ahead.

![Fig. 2. Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), circa 1900](http://dic.academic.ru/pictures/wiki/files/69/EdmundHusserl.jpg)

Husserl emphasizes knowing and apodictic certainty over opining and
believing. This becomes more valuable in regards to the narratives of Varo and
Borges, which do tend to arouse and activate uninspected personalized opinions in readers and viewers. In this study, the transcendental phenomenological methodology referenced and used include some of the primary terms and concepts that have specific meanings in Husserl’s work that can be applied to the circuitous, labyrinthine aesthetic orientations and work of Varo and Borges.

Although these terms and concepts are interrelated in Husserlian methodology, each requires definition and clarification in this chapter. As these terms, concepts, and principles are considered individually, one must nevertheless continually keep in mind that each term does not really exist in isolation but functions in an interrelated dynamic of investigative thought with various other Husserlian terms, concepts, and principles. Epochē, for example, works with Husserl’s neutrality modification, along with his frequently repeated admonition to “return to the things themselves.” Husserlian givenness functions in conjunction with intentionality and a specific form of intuition. Presentation and re-presentation, subjectivity and consciousness, and other terms and concepts work together as reciprocal units. Meanwhile, the multifarious meanings of the term “transcendental” pervade Husserl’s entire body of thought. These terms and the combined usages of terms require more elucidation before moving on to the question of a Husserlian approach to the arts.

**Husserlian Transcendental Subjectivity and Consciousness**

Since “transcendental consciousness” and “transcendental subjectivity” are sometimes used synonymously, either by Husserl or Husserlian scholars, it is useful to distill and clarify, as much as possible, the Husserlian use of the word “transcendental” in general. What does Husserl mean by transcendental subjectivity,
transcendental consciousness, transcendental ego, or, for that matter, why does he describe his work as transcendental phenomenology in the first place?

In order to understand transcendental phenomenology one must first consider Husserl’s orientation to subjectivity. David Carr excerpts a comment from Husserl about subjectivity: “The paradox of human subjectivity: being a subject for the world and at the same time being an object in the world” (Carr, Paradox, 3). John B. Brough describes the distinctive uses of Husserlian subjectivity, in which “authentic philosophical reflection” is inherent in the turn to the subject:

The subject in question is transcendental in Husserl’s sense; it is the subject that intends or presents the world. The Husserlian turn to the subject is therefore not a turn away from the object into a solipsistic self, nor is it a turn to a self which creates its object out of whole cloth; it is rather a taking up of the object in its relation to the subject, the ‘dative of manifestation,’ as Thomas Prüfer so aptly puts it, to which the object presents itself” (Brough, “Art and Artworld” 35-36).

Husserl’s methodology necessarily requires a turn towards the subject himself or herself, which action leads to Husserlian transcendental subjectivity, and which is not just about a completely separated version of self-identified subjectivity. For Husserl, “it is clear also that the subjectivity of the transcendental subject is a far cry from the arbitrariness of individual subjectivity—from ‘subjectivism,’ we might say” (Lauer xviii), or from some form of solipsism.

The art of Varo and Borges often reflect encounters with memory and the shifting characteristics of self and subjectivity. Husserl’s understanding of
subjectivity, on the other hand, is a challenge to the objectivist turn in modern science, which Husserl felt was a misunderstanding of how subjectivity functions and accomplishes actions in the world. In fact, this misunderstanding sometimes surfaces in regards to Husserl’s work itself.

It has frequently been presumed, and rightly so since Husserl made this statement himself, that Husserl’s approach to consciousness is always consciousness of an object. While that is correct, at least as a stand alone assertion, it is also in some contexts a partial view of Husserl’s work because it does not take into account related aspects such as Husserlian “absolute consciousness” or other essential factors. In one art history discussion of Sartre’s philosophical position quoted below, for example, it is noted that Sartre’s argument “begins with the perception, adopted from Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology, that consciousness is always consciousness of something other than itself” (Foster 460). What is presumed to be Husserl’s summary understanding of consciousness is then described in more detail:

It is what Husserl had called “intentional consciousness,” which means that it comes into being only in the act of perceiving, grasping, direct itself toward an object. It is thus always a movement beyond itself, a projection that empties itself out, leaving no “contents” behind. Consciousness is “nonreflexive”: I do not hear myself speaking any more than I see myself seeing. Empty and transparent, consciousness traverses itself without ever finding anything in its path on the way to its object. And that object is marked by its own transcendence, its outsideness to consciousness itself (460).
Yet is Husserl’s “intentional consciousness” actually an adequate summary of Husserl’s understanding of consciousness? The authors of this art history textbook, a group of preeminent contemporary art professionals, go on to describe Husserl’s intentional consciousness as an “exteriorization” process in which the human being is synthesized in a unity with the world (460).  

Meanwhile, other scholars have brought a more detailed assessment to Husserl and consciousness, noting that Husserl felt subjectivity’s first person point of view was “ineliminable from the very concept of knowledge” and that what he called “functioning subjectivity” is an anonymous pre-egoic form of subjectivity which is responsible for the givenness of the world and its ‘always already there’ character” (Moran and Cohen 311-312). Husserl’s mature work with consciousness has been described as a “framework that recognized all consciousness as part of the mysterious transcendental life of the subject in an intersubjective community of co-subjects” (Moran, *Husserl: Founder*, 173).  

In his “Husserl and the ‘absolute’,” Dan Zahavi gives his rendering of a central aspect of Husserl and transcendental idealism:

> On my reading, Husserl is committed to the view that reality depends transcendentially upon consciousness…This view has various metaphysical implications—it has implications for our fundamental understanding of what counts as real and it leads to a rejection of metaphysical realism—but it doesn’t entail that consciousness is the metaphysical origin or source of reality. Husserl might indeed consider consciousness a necessary condition for reality. To that extent, Smith
is right in saying that for Husserl nothing would exist in the absence of consciousness ("Husserl and the ‘absolute’ " 87).

The above statement, which to some degree accentuates the insufficiency and unfairness of reducing Husserl’s work with consciousness to only being “intentional consciousness,” also represents the Husserlian track generally followed herein as well—that consciousness is not separated from reality, that so-called reality “depends transcendentally upon consciousness” (87). In other words, what is argued in this study, which uses Husserlian methodology, is that it is not consciousness that is dependent on the world, but vice versa—that the world appears within consciousness.

Husserl’s work with consciousness has also been described thus:

Around 1907 Husserl came to postulate an “absolute” or “primal consciousness” (Urbewußtsein) as a temporalizing consciousness that is not itself temporal but constitutes everything temporal. This absolute consciousness is the basic level of consciousness; it is “originary consciousness” (Urbewusstsein). Consciousness as such is absolute being to which everything has to be related. Absolute consciousness contains the past, present and future, all included within it (Moran and Cohen 24).

That stated, as valuable as it is, does not, however, erase the complexities of Husserlian phenomenology. For example, Anthony J. Steinbock addresses, while considering the scope of transcendental phenomenology, the multifarious nature of Husserl’s use of the word “transcendental”: 
Let me note at the outset that the problem with speaking of Husserl’s notion of the “transcendental” is that Husserl does not have a singular theory of transcendental philosophy. Or at least this is my contention. As we shall see later in more detail, what transcendental phenomenology means depends to a large extent on the ways in which it is carried out in concrete contexts of phenomenological research (Home 12).

Steinbock goes on to say that, nonetheless, two traits are identifiable. For Husserl, a transcendental phenomenology must investigate the constitution of sense through a constitutive reduction, and it must identify a priori structures through an eidetic reduction (Home 12).

To consider this more generally for a moment, what is the meaning of consciousness in the field of phenomenology? Many books have been written about this theme, but how does one succinctly address the topic of phenomenological consciousness? In the forward to Maurice Natanson’s *The Erotic Bird: Phenomenology in Literature*, Judith Butler addresses questions of consciousness and subjectivity:

Phenomenology has been dismissed by some as a philosophy of “consciousness,” where the presumption reigns that “consciousness” is a speculative and psychologistic notion, unnecessary or a diversion in relation to literary reading. Such arguments, however, presume that they know what they mean by consciousness: that it is an interior and ideal “stream” of perceptions, the property of a subjectivity cut off
ontologically from a relationship to the world. Such notions, however, have little to do with the notion of consciousness offered here (Butler, ix).

In *The Erotic Bird*, Natanson applies a phenomenological methodology to the literature of Franz Kafka, Samuel Beckett and Thomas Mann, among others. In the present context, the goal is to consider how these kinds of phenomenological themes are specifically related to the work of Borges and Varo, and part of this argument includes an acknowledgment that absolute consciousness in art surfaces when a sensibility to the numinous attracts, fuels, or at least in some way affects the artist’s creative process.

Before addressing the Husserlian uses of a priori and eidetic reduction per se, some additional points warrant consideration. One is the similar yet distinct approaches to subjectivity in Descartes and Husserl. In fact, Husserl felt that Descartes unknowingly did discover transcendental subjectivity but could not recognize or make use of it. In his *Cartesian Meditations* Husserl asserts:

> At this point, following Descartes, we make the great reversal that, if made in the right manner, leads to transcendental subjectivity: the turn to the *ego cogito* as the ultimate and apodictically certain basis for judgments, the basis on which any radica-philosophy [*sic*] must be grounded” (18).³⁴

Essentially, Husserl is saying that if Descartes had gone about his argument in “the right manner” (20), he would have recognized and acknowledged transcendental subjectivity. In other words, Descartes did not go far enough to satisfy Husserl, but
instead concluded his argument with the syllogism *cogito ergo sum*, implying by that proposition an individualistic subjectivity as the final ground of being. Husserl, however, sees subjectivity as a means, albeit a mandatory and preeminent means, rather than a terminal designation of being. His “functioning subjectivity” (Moran and Cohen 312) is pre-egoic and nameless.

A key point that bears repeating is that Husserl’s search for knowledge is primarily aimed at understanding transcendental consciousness. The Husserlian meaning of transcendental consciousness is “consciousness as the agent disclosive of the world and intentionally united with that world, or, more simply, the whole that is ‘consciousness of the world’—is for phenomenology the absolute concretum. There is nothing that can be meaningfully posited outside this concretum” (Drummond 205). The ultimate “absolute concretum” is in Husserlian terms “absolute consciousness,” or the most fundamental level of phenomenological analysis (Drummond 32).

**Epochē, Neutrality Modification, and “Back to the Things Themselves”**

Epochē is quite possibly the single most important concept of Husserl’s investigations. Husserl’s uses the epochē as an active method of bracketing out certain elements from perceptual considerations. At the same time, epochē is directly related to Husserl’s broader concept of neutrality modification and his term “back to the things themselves,” and thus is the pivotal means around which Husserl’s phenomenology turns, rendering it of paramount importance for understanding his work and to understanding the significance of using his work in this study: “The Greek term epochē is used by Husserl (sometimes transliterated in German as
Epocche) to mean a procedure of bracketing, excluding, canceling, putting out of action certain belief components of our experience” (Moran and Cohen 106), which is to say that Husserl’s use of epochē acts as a clearing mechanism, one that allows an investigation to proceed without becoming entangled with preconceptual issues that are, thematically speaking, of peripheral phenomenological significance.

It is important to remember that Husserlian phenomenology must deal (or rather not deal) with what Husserl calls the natural attitude. The epochē (or bracketing out or phenomenological reduction) is a means for accounting for the natural attitude in a way that allows a phenomenological investigation to explicate not the what of the appearance of an object, but the how of that appearance. What is this troublesome natural attitude that must be accounted for and why must it require a bracketing out? Husserl states:

Our first outlook upon life is that of natural human beings, imaging, judging, feeling, willing, “from the natural standpoint”. Let us make clear to ourselves what this means in the form of simple meditations which we can best carry on in the first person. I am aware of a world, spread out in space endlessly, and in time becoming and become, without end. I am aware of it, that means, first of all, I discover it seen and observed, through the unseen portions of the room behind my back to the verandah, into the garden, to the children in the summer-house, and so forth, to all the objects concerning which I precisely “know” that they are there and yonder in my immediate co-perceived surroundings—a knowledge which has nothing of conceptual thinking
in it, and first changes into clear intuiting with the bestowing of
attention, and even then only partially and for the most part very
imperfectly (Ideas 51-52).

In Husserlian transcendental phenomenology, the phenomenological epochē
as evolved by Husserl is closely associated with an admonition or phrase Husserl
often used: *Wir wollen auf die ‘Sachen selbst’ zurückgehen* (“back to the things
themselves”):

Otherwise put: we can absolutely not rest content with ‘mere words’,
i.e. with a merely symbolic understanding of ‘words’, such as we first
have when we reflect on the sense of laws for ‘concepts’,
‘judgements’, ‘truths’ etc. (together with their manifold specifications)
which are set up in pure logic. Meanings inspired only by remote,
confused, inauthentic intuitions—if by any intuitions at all—are not
enough: we must go back to the ‘things themselves’. We desire to
render self-evident in fully-fledged intuitions that what is here given in
actually performed abstractions is what the word-meanings in our
expression of the law really truly stand for (Husserl, *Logical
Investigations* v.1 168).

This seemingly simple admonition of “back to the things themselves” is given
an almost mantric principle in Husserlian thought, reflecting how Husserl’s passion to
free up thinking from any abstract presupposition that would disallow genuine
investigation is a foundational principle in his work. It also reveals much about
phenomenology, about Husserl’s integrity and character, and about understanding
Husserlian methodology in the present study. Husserl uses epochē as a means for bringing his seminal principle of “back to things themselves” into the actual phenomenological dynamic itself rather than simply talking about the principle and the dynamic:

Husserl’s commitment to knowledge’s integrity involves something greater than the theory of knowledge that is today defined under the heading of “epistemology”. Beyond theory and its pretension to know, Husserl’s philosophical thought, from its initial concern with the philosophy of arithmetic to its final concern with the crisis of European humanity, is driven by the following: the felt need to justify all claims to know, even the seemingly most secure, on the basis of something more original than the computational consistency of logical and mathematical formulae and supposed facts supplied by the natural and social sciences. This “something more” is early on formulated by him as the “things themselves”, the return to which was to become not just Husserl’s motto but the watchword of the entire phenomenological movement spawned by his thought. “We must”, Husserl exhorts us in all his major works beginning with the Logical Investigations, “return to the things themselves” (Hopkins 3).

The Husserlian epochē has already been referenced and utilized in other phenomenological aesthetic studies of modernism (Mildenberg, “Openings” 41-49). Likewise, contemporary French scholar Natalie Depraz has emphasized the inherent relationship between epochē and imagination, noting that in the first volume of
Husserl’s *Ideen*, “he provides us with an intrinsic link between imagination and the very method of phenomenology, namely, the epochē” (Depraz 155). Explaining how imagination (unlike perception) “suspends the actual existence of the object,” directing toward its “ineffective modality,” Depraz suggests that this clears the way to a great variety of possibility instead of (as in perception) one unique reality (Depraz 155-156). In this context both epochē and imagination override factual limitations and allow fresh possibilities, a dynamic that will be examined in more detail later.

**Givenness, Intentionality, Intuition**

In phenomenological terms a reception of givenness or the appearance of the object occurs. If appearances are given to consciousness, givenness (*Gegebenheit*) becomes relevant, for example, when examining an artist’s creative process, a point that is relevant ahead. Givenness in Husserlian terms is an experience of something, the object appearing (being given in appearance) and experienced (received), at which point the subject (here, the artist, and also the viewer of a work of art) is perceiving the object that is given in appearance.

Another related central principle of Husserl’s phenomenology is intentionality (Brough, “Edmund Husserl” 151). Intentionality (*Intentionalität*) in a Husserlian context indicates the directedness of a conscious state.

Judith Butler, in her introduction to Maurice Natanson’s *The Erotic Bird* referenced above (pages 33-34) goes on to discuss Natanson’s use of two Husserlian elements—Husserl’s theory of intentionality and the givenness of objects of consciousness. After mentioning the uses of intentionality by William James and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Butler notes: “Intentionality thus characterizes a certain
isomorphism between consciousness and its world, one that cannot be spatially grasped” (x). Butler then addresses subjectivity and consciousness as understood in phenomenology:

The notion that consciousness belongs solely to the domain of subjectivity thus misses the phenomenological point that subjectivity always belongs to the world: consciousness is always consciousness of its object, it is nothing without its preposition, and its preposition marks its kinship with the world that it interrogates. Consciousness is, thus, in its very structure, in an implicit relation to the world it seeks to know, and seeks to know that world precisely to the extent that it is “of” it in some way. What this means is that the terms of subjectivity that we often imagine to be residing in a psychic interiority, such as consciousness, memory, and imagination are to be found precisely in a constitutive and binding relation to the world, intentional relations that posit a world they do not make, that build up a world of objects whose thereness is disclosed as irrefutable (x).36

That intentionality is closely partnered with intuition in Husserl’s phenomenology requires one to understand how Husserl uses the term “intuition.” The most immediate and primary definition of intuition in the Oxford English Dictionary is that intuition is “immediate apprehension” (“Intuition”). Derived from the Latin intueri, which is often translated as meaning “to look inside” or “to contemplate,” intuition when defined as “immediate apprehension” allows for a broad interpretation of “apprehension,” covering many states such as sensation, knowledge,
and even mystical rapport. “Immediate” in this context can be used for a variety of mediation, and also implies a lack or absence of interference, or an absence of cognitive thought (“intuition”). Intuition in Husserl’s phenomenology is used in several ways, including as “evidence” and as eidetic intuition, the intuition of an eidos or essence. Suffice it to say here that intuitions are perceptions or modifications of perception, and intuition indicates a “location” where an intentional object is directly present via that intentionality; when an intention is "filled" by the apprehension of an object, that object is intuited. Varo’s paintings reflect a use of intentionality in which a direct apprehension of a given object fulfills intentionality as an intuition of the object, even when that apprehension is rooted in, fueled by, or transformed into fantasy or memory. Ultimately, intentionality and apprehension yield an intuition of immediate structure as evidence of life in art.

While some of the subtle distinctions among Husserl’s uses of “intuition” are explicated and broken down by his student Emmanuel Levinas (Levinas, *Theory*), what is important to emphasize is how Levinas’s explication of Husserlian intentionality recognizes the uncommon significance (beyond the common one of intending to do something) that Husserl assigns to intentionality:

It expresses the fact, which at first does not seem original, that each act of consciousness is conscious of something: each perception is the perception of a perceived object, each desire the desire of desired object, each judgment the judgment of a “state of affairs” (*Sachverhalt*) about which one makes a pronouncement. But we shall soon realize the philosophical interest of this property of
consciousness and the profound transformation that it brings to the
very notion of consciousness (Levinas, *Theory* 40).

Levinas emphasizes that when intentionality becomes (in Husserlian
phenomenology) a bridge between the world and consciousness, what occurs is the
breakdown of the subject-object dichotomy, so that “[intentionality] is not the way in
which a subject tries to make contact with an object that exists beside it. Intentionality
is what makes up the very subjectivity of subject” (Levinas, *Theory* 41). Levinas
asserts that Husserl, by overcoming the substantialist concept of existence,
demonstrated how “a subject is not something that first exists and then relates to
objects” (41).

To stay for a moment with Husserl’s use of intentionality, it is again
contemporary scholar Dan Zahavi who offers a clear interpretation of that topic:

> In his analysis of the structure of experience, Husserl pays particular
> attention to a group of experiences that are all characterized by being
> conscious of something, that is, which all possess an object-
> directedness. This attribute is also called intentionality. One does not
> merely love, fear, see, or judge, one loves a beloved, fears something
> fearful, sees an object, and judges a state of affairs. Regardless of
> whether we are talking of a perception, thought, judgment, fantasy,
> doubt, expectation, or recollection, all of these diverse forms of
> consciousness are characterized by intending objects and cannot be
> analyzed properly without a look at their objective correlate, that is,
> the perceived, doubted, expected object (*Husserl’s Phenomenology*
Givenness remains relevant both to Husserlian phenomenological principles and art-making in artists whose creative processes are connected to a sensibility to the numinous. Anthony J. Steinbock’s reference to “givenness in mystical experience and phenomenology” emphasizes that a Husserlian orientation facilitates more than a theological rendering and categorization: “This is why it is necessary to be open to a broader field of evidence. Such a task…is philosophico-phenomenological, not theological” (Steinbock 27).

**Image Consciousness (or “Depicting Consciousness”)**

The “broader field of evidence” cited above by Steinbock, one that requires a philosophical-phenomenological orientation, was noted on the first page of this study’s introduction. The Husserlian concepts and terms used are interwoven and interact within in a context of reciprocity. In arguing that image consciousness as it exists in an artist’s creative process of making art is rooted in a sensibility to the numinous, some points arise about Husserl’s orientation to image consciousness (Moran and Cohen 158-159). Although perception obviously plays a major role in making and viewing visual art, perception and image consciousness are not identical in Husserl’s phenomenology. The specific modality of consciousness that is Husserlian image consciousness is separate from but combined with perception, including being combined in the creative process.

To step back momentarily, the key to understanding this lies in Husserlian givenness (*Gegebenheit*), the appearance itself. There are multifarious influential elements, depending on the form of consciousness being experienced, that enter into
Husserlian givenness. Besides perceiving and imagining, there is Husserlian picture consciousness or sign consciousness (signitive consciousness). Therefore, “as Husserl writes, even external perception is a constant pretension to accomplish what it is not in a position to accomplish, namely, the complete givenness of the object; we are never with a plus ultra.” (Steinbock, *Phenomenology and Mysticism*, 35).

Memory, fantasy, and image consciousness are all forms of re-presentation for Husserl, although image consciousness is related to perception, which is presentation, “where what is actually intended is not the same as what is sensuously presented” (Moran and Cohen 158). By this schemata, a photograph of a person first appears, for example, as a paper object, not as a person, and a painting first appears as paint applied to canvas rather than as a composition, although I would predict that many viewers would debate that. A photograph might appear only tangentially as a paper object rather than “first” appearing that way.

But then again, how is knowing related to perceiving? Artists often scoff at being asked what some work “means.” Can a sense of unknowing or not-knowing be allowed or even caused beyond a spontaneous occurrence of not-knowing? I propose that the epochē does at least provide for such a possibility. Although obviously not a Husserlian exclusivity, Husserl’s use of epochē, when combined with the ocularcentric premises in Husserl’s phenomenology, lends itself, at least up to a point, to an unfettered phenomenological explication of visual art, an explication that also works with literary art.
Two other key elements in the overall Husserlian phenomenological orientation, and especially here in regards to examining art, are the terms presentation and re-presentation.

**Presentation and Re-presentation**

Husserl connects perception directly to presentation, while re-presentation is essential to Husserlian concepts of memory, expectation, phantasy (or imagination), and image consciousness. Nonetheless, perception is “never far from the center” of any discussion of re-presentation (Brough, “Translator’s Introduction” XXXII-XXXIII). Brough also notes in his introduction to *Phantasy, Image Consciousness, and Memory (1898-1925)* that Husserl worked on understanding the forms of re-presentation for many years:

Despite the ubiquity and obvious importance of presentation and re-presentation in our conscious lives—we are always perceiving in our waking moments, and very often remembering, phantasizing, and looking at images—the connections and differences among these experiences are elusive and obscure. They initially confront the philosopher as a tangled skein of phenomena, and Husserliana XXIII may be read as a chronicle of Husserl's attempts to tease them apart. He returned to this task again and again, his views evolving over the years and in some cases undergoing dramatic change. What he achieved by the end of his life was a comprehensive, if not exhaustive, account of the forms of re-presentation and their relations to one another to other phenomena (XXXI).
Another kind of neutralization in consciousness is possible aesthetically (Moran and Cohen 221). Thus, “a member of a theatre audience, for example, does not posit an actor’s being assaulted on the stage as a real world event, and this precludes the audience member from rushing to the stage to intervene on behalf of the assaulted actor” (Drummond 143). Before going into more detail about a transcendental phenomenological approach to art, it is necessary to consider the infrastructure of Husserlian image consciousness.

The Infrastructure of Image Consciousness and “Questioning Back,”

To consider the precise meaning of Husserlian image-consciousness requires a continuation of examining the meanings of the larger context that includes not only image-consciousness, but also other Husserlian principles. One might say that understanding Husserlian image-consciousness requires what Husserl himself sometimes referred to as “questioning back” (Rückfragen), a regressive inquiry or dismantling in order to locate the “primary foundation” (Urstiftung) of concepts (Moran and Cohen 70). Thus, if phenomenology is the study of phenomenon and a phenomenon appears, then the next question to ask is what this something is appearing to? Since it can only be appearing in consciousness, Husserl investigates how appearances are “given” to consciousness, and this is one of the most central and essential functions of phenomenology—to study how something appears. “Phenomenology does not attempt to speak about things, but only about the way they manifest themselves, and hence it tries to describe the nature of appearance as such” (Lewis and Staehler 1). In a Husserlian phenomenological context, what the something is that is given, or why the something is given to consciousness, are
secondary considerations. The most fundamental phenomenological principle driving an investigation is to return to the thing itself and see how it appears. One can understand, then, why Husserl insisted that phenomenology was a scientific study rather than a metaphysical one.

As pointed out by Brough, Husserlian image consciousness “is complex, involving as many as three objects” (Translator’s Introduction XLI). For Husserl, one work of art, say a painting, is three objects described as the physical image (e.g. the physical canvas), the representing or depicting object, and the represented or depicted object. On the other hand—to momentarily drop into a non-Husserlian mode—a framed painting could be seen as one object, as an assemblage, representing more than one form of consciousness simultaneously.

Since a theme underlying this investigation of how a sensibility to the numinous influences the role of image consciousness in making and viewing modern art, it remains essential to reference Husserl’s phenomenological principles alongside his philosophy of art, at least to the extent that he stated a philosophy of art. If Husserlian transcendental phenomenology addresses imagination, image consciousness, phantasy, memory, and time consciousness (Brough, Translator’s Introduction XXIX-LXVIII), these principles can be applied aesthetically in order to expand Husserl’s thinly expressed philosophy of art.

The point here is that any Husserlian philosophy of art or aesthetic is never far from his phenomenological methodology. For Husserl, what is being perceived, or given to consciousness, becomes in the present study the art object. To investigate in Husserlian terms the art object and the creative process that yielded the art object as
given to consciousness for perceptual receiving, it is necessary to understand a few more details of Husserlian methodology.

**Image Consciousness and the Work of Art**

Husserl’s insistence that aesthetic consciousness is directly related to the consciousness of an object and the manner of that object’s appearing (*Phantasy* 459) leads one to ask if his theory of image consciousness is the same as consciousness of an object. In other words, does Husserl consider aesthetics as being somehow outside the realm of phenomenological principles, or are they the same principle? Either answer—yes or no—is a real possibility, given the somewhat contradictory way Husserl compares phenomenology and the work of art in the Hofmannsthal letter, considered ahead. However, Husserl does employ his phenomenological principle of neutrality modification in an artistic context when directly viewing and considering, or participating in, a work of art. In fact, the Husserlian epochē acts as one kind of neutrality modification:

According to Husserl, the neutrality modification is universal in that it can modify not just beliefs but all kinds of position takings. It is akin to pure entertaining of the content of the judgement without the making of any explicit judgement or taking any stance including a sceptical one (Moran and Dermot 221).

Husserl sees neutrality modification as a universal aspect of consciousness:

For Husserl, the neutrality modification is a wholly unique yet universal structural feature of consciousness and one that it is
hugely important in that its presence enables the very possibility of philosophical reflection on the life of consciousness. Epochē, idle fantasy, etc., are themselves all varieties of neutrality modification. The neutrality modification is a very deep part of consciousness, but, because it makes no claim on truth or validity, it is, according to Husserl, difficult to access (Moran and Dermot 222).

When explicating neutrality modification, Husserl is addressing belief, or the sphere of belief, and how neutrality modification is a general kind of modification of consciousness that has nothing whatsoever to do with the sphere of belief (Ideas 224-225), which is to say that the neutrality modification deals with or neutralizes opinion and assumption. Husserl states:

We are dealing now with a modification which in a certain sense completely removes and renders powerless every doxic modality to which it is related, but in a totally different way from that of negation, which, in addition, as we saw, shows in the negated a positive effect, a non-being which is itself once more being. It cancels nothing, it “performs” nothing, it is the conscious counterpart of all performance: its neutralization (Ideas 224).

Husserl’s definition of phenomenology as the study or science of the essence of consciousness, and his assertion that consciousness is always consciousness of something, means that any attempt to excavate a Husserlian methodology associated with a philosophy of art must begin with consciousness (Bewußtsein). Narrowing that
orientation to the thematic context of this dissertation, all the facets and ramifications of Husserlian image consciousness or “depicting consciousness” (Bildbewußtein, also translated as “depicting consciousness”) should be defined and understood, although with image consciousness examples or illustrations are more clarifying than verbal explanations.

But to reach the implications of image consciousness, subject-object dichotomy needs to be acknowledged. In applying a Husserlian methodology to art-making, the problem of subject-object dichotomy sooner or later surfaces. Varo, for example, had a distinctive approach to the object, an irreal approach. The object is a fundamental component of Husserlian transcendental phenomenology, whereas Varo and other artists are, to put it simply, working to move beyond the art object, or (to be specific in her case) working to move beyond the conventional notion of an object via creating the transformed irreal art object. How is this distinction reconciled in a Husserlian aesthetic that addresses Varo’s or Borges’s creative processes? Ultimately, the answer is different for each artist, but to continue with the case of Varo’s aesthetic, she is actually motivated, via her irreal fabulism, to challenged the implications inherent in the conventional belief of the recognizable object, which thus is not at odds with the Husserlian neutrality modification. Her art-making is an example of a neutrality modification that is not specifically the epoché, but is unique to the aesthetics of the creative process, a process related to image consciousness.

Also, Varo and Borges necessarily accentuate the object in art in the sense that the recognizable object’s irreal appearance remains present as an aspect of the reality depicted within the work of art. Ultimately, a Husserlian methodology yields
an infrastructure or network of Husserlian concepts that underlie image consciousness in a given work of art.

In fact, Husserl’s investigations of subjectivity, consciousness, intentionality, intersubjectivity, objectivity, and image consciousness are as complex as Borges and Varo’s entanglements with self and self-identification. The two artists’ uses of irrealism are related to subjectivity and intersubjectivity. Thus before looking more closely at Borges and Varo’s work with irrealism it is important to understand beforehand Husserl’s work with fantasy.

**Fantasy**

In Husserlian terms, fantasy is imagination. The complex distinctions among perception, image consciousness, fantasy and related topics have been elucidated:

Husserl was interested in all the central mental acts including perception, memory, and fantasy. He regards an act of fantasizing or imagining (as distinct from seeing pictures as pictures: ‘image consciousness’) as a special modification of perception. Without perception there could be no fantasy. Fantasy is characterized as a kind of re-presentation or ‘presentification’ or ‘presentiation’ (*Vergegenwärtigung*) since it does not have the full ‘fleshly’ (*leibhaftig*) character of perception. Husserl distinguishes between image consciousness (*Bildbewußtsein*) and fantasy (*Phantasie*). Image consciousness is rooted in the perception of a present object that, as image, refers to an other (absent) object (*Husserlina* XXIII 82). The fantasy, by way of contrast, is not based on the perception of a present
object but is a quasi-perception of a sensuous object. Fantasy differs from perception in that perception presents the object with the character of existing in the present whereas the existence of the fantasized object is irrelevant in acts of fantasy and imagination. Existence is simply left to one side. What is fantasized is not necessarily past, present, or future, but is presented ‘as-if’ (Husserl, *Thing and Space*, 11-12), and is not an actual perception. This is a structural feature of fantasy itself: it has the character of ‘depicting’ rather than presenting (Husserl, *Phantasy*, 16). In fantasy, there is no positing the object (Moran and Cohen 120).

As is often the case, commentaries on Husserl can be more accessible than Husserl’s own writings. However, To quote directly from Husserl:

> In phantasy, the object does not stand there as in the flesh, actual, currently present. It indeed does stand before our eyes, but not as something currently given now; it may be possible to be thought of as now, or as simultaneous with the current now, but this now is a thought one, and is not that now which pertains to presence in the flesh, perceptual presence. The phantasized is merely ‘represented’ (*vorgestellt*), it merely places before us (*stellt vor*) or presents (*stellt dar*), but it ‘does not give itself’ as itself, actual and now (Husserl, *Thing and Space*, 12).
Husserlian fantasy is a topic that will necessarily be applied to an understanding of irreal fabulism in Borges and Varo, but a question to explore first is if Husserl even proposes an aesthetic or a philosophy of art.

**Excavating a Husserlian Philosophy of Art**

Does Husserl already have a philosophy of art? Whether or not a fully developed Husserlian philosophy of art is possible has remained debatable. This study may provide a step towards authenticating that possibility, but it doesn’t claim to fully explicate that issue. It must be noted here, however, that contemporary scholars such as John B. Brough and Milan Uzelac have each already suggested a Husserlian aesthetic, and their commentaries are valued resources for this paper, as are the Husserlian aesthetic themes in the essays of Christian Ferencz-Flatz.

Since the proposal here is to use Husserl’s phenomenology to investigate art—primarily in this study, the art of Varo and Borges—one is required to understand any aesthetic or philosophy of art already evolved in Husserl’s work. That said, any attempt to excavate a Husserlian philosophy of art must begin, as Edmund Husserl did in all of his investigations, with a return to the thing itself. An artist’s root impulse to create a physical work of art in a specific manner can be better understood via a magnified focus on the object, and that magnification occurs naturally when using the epochê, or phenomenological reduction. If preliminary elements for a Husserlian philosophy of art are already present, they may surface more directly and accessibly by examining a work of art via a transcendental phenomenological methodology in which phenomena—objects, physical and non-physical—are given in appearance prior to the assigning recognizable attributions or characteristics. Various
components in Edmund Husserl’s phenomenological investigations of appearance can serve to explicate issues of consciousness when applied to specific art works. One aspect of using the epochē or Husserlian bracketing is that a kind of unknowing occurs, and there are many avenues on which this experience of unknowing can travel, including artistic avenues.

Varo is altering so-called reality via her art, as is Borges. Usually in Husserl’s epochē the lived experience is bracketed out in order to distill to an essence of what is being considered; in the case of Varo’s painting, the presumptions and presuppositions inherent in the lived experience are not nullified but presented as transformed experiences. In both Varo and Borges, presumptions and presuppositions inherent in the lived experience are modified via imagination and transformed into an aesthetic that allows the dream state and other, less common or alternative states of consciousness. Bracketing out conventional definitions of reality in order to accentuate via irrealism a kind of spiritual impulse in their art, Varo and Borges each repeatedly reshapes sans presuppositions their fabulist storytelling to express their searches for the numinous. As will be seen in more detail in the next chapter, the experience of wonder and self-forgetting serve to open the perceptual mind beyond conscious and unconscious notions of philosophical and aesthetic barriers. The fact that such barriers are partly in place because of unconscious presumptions reflects the value of irrealism in art as a means of bringing to the visible, narratological (visual or literary) surface the intense emotional and psychological personal symbolism of lived experience and a sensibility to the numinous.
“Bracketing,” however, is more complex than one might presuppose. As noted earlier, the Husserlian epochē clears the way for a Husserlian methodology. Now if that bracketing process of epochē sets aside preconceptual belief systems, as Husserl asserts, are his opinions relative to the purity of art (described shortly) set aside as well, or do the methodological principles of his transcendental phenomenology become somehow incorporated by his philosophy of art? In other words, how can a “return to the things themselves” and Husserl’s use of epochē combine with the idealistic trope of purity as described in the pages ahead in Husserl’s letter to Hofmannsthal? That ideal of purity is a rare moment for Husserl in that he is momentarily more aligned with a metaphysical orientation than the scientific principles he usually calls forth in his transcendental phenomenology.43

Phenomenology’s fundamental premise consists in stripping away presuppositions, going back to what is primary, to intentional acts through which one constitutes one’s experience. Husserl’s call to return ‘to the things themselves’44 amounts to a bracketing of the real, to a return to the things as they appear to consciousness, the things as phenomena, as they are perceived by consciousness. Such a view is bound up with a principle of doubt directed towards the reality of things (Bourne-Taylor and Mildenberg 25).

Considering the roles of reduction in Husserl’s work brings up a related and, in this investigation, very relevant issue about transcendental consciousness—Husserlian transcendental experience (transzendentale Erfahrung): “Husserl claims that the epochē opens up a new dimension of experience—transcendental
experience—and the functioning of transcendental subject that is normally hidden is brought to light. Husserl speaks of this domain as a domain of experience” (Moran and Cohen 329). This dimension of experience is promising in explicating the driving forces behind Varo and Borges’s respective aesthetics. Indeed, transcendental experience is a key to understanding much art.

However, Husserl’s investigative methodology per se does not supplant his philosophy of art, as limited as it may be. Husserl does present various aesthetic observations and principles. He did observe, for example, that all art moves between two extremes, one being image art, mediated through image consciousness, and the other being “purely a matter of phantasy [fantasy], producing phantasy formations in the modification of pure neutrality. At least producing no concrete depictive image” (Husserl, *Phantasy* 651). The fact that Husserlian transcendental phenomenology addresses imagination (or what Husserl called phantasy), as well as image consciousness, memory, and time consciousness (Brough, Translator’s Introduction XXIX-LXVIII) allows these principles to be applied aesthetically: “This achievement of the imagination does not affect the side of sensibility but the side of the expected, that is, in a certain sense the side of the schema. It is a method of perspectival correction (*Umzeichnung*) and positional alteration of the expected objects” (Lamar, “Husserl’s Type and Kant’s Schemata” 102). These principles in Husserl’s phenomenological investigations of appearance become accentuated when applied to visual or literary art. While Husserl did not establish a highly defined or extensive aesthetic per se, he did create a highly sophisticated investigative means for studying
anything one wishes to study, and that investigative means can be useful in exploring the distinctive creative processes utilized by both Varo and Borges.

Their work and their creative processes are also accessible to Husserlian transcendental phenomenology—especially in their cases—because Husserl considered how perspectival distortion and the alteration of shape, because of a change in an object’s position, has to be accounted for via the imagination and image consciousness. Although Husserl does not restrict “consciousness” to a state of consciousness, be it conceptual, visionary, fantasy, memory or other, the object (physical or otherwise) of consciousness remains predominant in transcendental phenomenology, and visual consciousness is a seminal element in his phenomenology. Husserl often offers up visual examples to illustrate a point or theory; in other words, there is a central strand of ocularcentrism in his work.

**Husserl’s Ocularcentrism**

The point for now is to excavate a Husserlian philosophy of art, a point that is much enhanced by Husserl’s ocularcentrism. Some scholars have noted ocularcentric premises in Husserl’s phenomenology (Jay 265-268; Lyotard 40). While his preference for immediate vision is an aspect of Husserl’s methodology that lends itself to a phenomenological explication of art, some of those scholars have described the limitations and contradictions that Husserl’s obsession with vision led to:

Even a cursory reading of Husserl’s writings, surveying his lifetime of work from the early *Logical Investigations* of 1901 through the late lectures and manuscripts of 1936, cannot but be struck by Husserl’s ocularcentrism: his reliance on a vision-generated, vision-oriented
rhetoric—and, as Derrida puts it, “the privilege given to vision.” And not only his reliance on the tropes of light and vision, but also, more extensively, his apparently inescapable dependence on metaphors of all sorts. But this dependency and reliance would not be the catastrophe that it is for his philosophical program, were it not for the fact that the logic of his visualism tempted him to envision an uncompromisingly total suspension or bracketing of existential referentiality and an absolutely uncompromised clarity and determinacy of meaning (Levin 67).

Without challenging the validity of David Michael Levin’s insightful criticisms of Husserl’s ocularcentrism and preference for immediate vision, I would postulate here that those noted implications of Husserl’s obsession with vision—bracketing out existential referentiality, desire for uncompromised clarity, and his ocularcentric obsession in general—are in fact some of the reasons a Husserlian methodology is so valuable for this study; Husserl’s exacting philosophy and precise methodology lends itself to a phenomenological explication of visual art. On the other hand, a Husserlian aesthetic remains an insufficient means, as a sole thematic resource, for a philosophico-phenomenological understanding of the roles of wonder and the numinous in artistic image-consciousness. Questions have been raised, for example, about the validity of Husserl’s “picture consciousness” (Lotz 171-185). These kinds of legitimate criticisms are necessary and essential; they must at the very least be acknowledged, and if shown to be valid, the Husserlian theory must give way to more specifically oriented, unequivocal theories. In fact, these kinds of challenges
to a Husserlian aesthetic, and there are a number of these,\textsuperscript{48} represents one of the ways to determine what additional resources specific to art are required, even if a Husserlian methodology remains essential.

A Husserlian transcendental phenomenological methodology applied in an aesthetic context gives rise to a caveat. Given the extensive and multifarious range of the arts, a Husserlian aesthetic approach requires and thus must allow for a degree of plasticity. An investigative means rooted in Husserlian principles or concepts may need to emphasize a given set of principles for one genre of art and a different set for another genre. While one or more principles might be applied to the visual art of Varo, for example, exploring some of Borges’s verse via a Husserlian orientation can require a different set of principles or components. Even contextual themes for one artist may require a shift of applied principles. Varo’s early more surrealistically oriented art from her life in Spain and France requires a shift of principles when considering the more distinctively irrealistic fabulist art and unique style she developed in Mexico. Thus some Husserlian principles may require of the art being investigated a thematic shift of emphasis in order to coherently elucidate that work of art. To investigate some of Borges’s fiction, for example, can require a multiple or multi-layered orientation and a transcendental phenomenological approach paired with philosophical intertextuality. This justifies the addition of some of Mikhail Bakhtin’s ideas and aesthetic theories, especially in Chapter Six.

Husserl does discuss aesthetic consciousness, primarily in \textit{Phantasy}, \textit{Image Consciousness, and Memory} (1898-1925), but elsewhere as well. Even though Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology is emphasized as much if not more for his
methodology as for his thoughts and opinions about beauty and art per se, his thoughts and opinions about seeing and receiving art, as well as making art, and his investigations of perception in general, are relevant to this thesis. The fact that image consciousness, for example, is thematically inherent in this study magnifies the importance of extending a Husserlian methodology towards and into aesthetic issues.

Furthermore, while Husserl’s work with perception and image consciousness become, in the language of Husserlian methodology, presentation and re-presentation, such specialized terminology does not mean that the methodological language of Husserlian transcendental phenomenology is too abstract or delineated to be used for an investigation of art and art theory. Thus any proposal for a Husserlian aesthetic or philosophy of art must take into account Husserl’s investigations of perception as presentation and the varieties of intuitive re-presentation he defines as image consciousness, phantasy, and memory, topics he sometimes directly illustrated via art and aesthetic examples in several of his books.49

While Husserl did not formally propose an aesthetic theory, he did on occasion address art and aesthetics in some of his lectures and writings, usually in a context of explicating a broader usage of phenomenological concepts. Neither did Husserl’s conversations and correspondence contain a philosophy of art per se, but he did at times consider the significance of art and aesthetics with others, as he did following a December 1906 visit by a distant relative of his wife, Malvine Husserl (née Steinschneider). The visiting relative was the poet Hugo von Hofmannsthal, who was touring Germany to read his paper “The Poet and this Time” at conferences (Huemer 121).
In January 1907 Husserl sent a letter to Hofmannsthal (Husserl “Letter”) that reveals some of Husserl’s more general ideas and opinions about a philosophy of art. At that time, Husserl had recently established some of his primary phenomenological principles, and there are a number of important issues disclosed in this letter. The first may be that, as Wolfgang Huemer proposes, Hofmannsthal, through his book Kleine Dramen, which Husserl read, stimulated Husserl’s development of epochē (121-122).

Huemer goes on to explain why he thinks Husserl failed to see “an important analogy between Husserl’s phenomenological method and Hofmannsthal’s aesthetic theory” primarily because Husserl did not at the time actually read Hofmannsthal’s most recent aesthetic writings (128).

However, the fact that Husserl talked about art and aesthetics in a non-scientific context is very useful here. In the Hofmannsthal letter, he affirms some affinities between a pure phenomenology and purity in art, and considers the role of intuition in both phenomenology and art, albeit in distinctive ways. For Husserl, a trope of purity exists in both phenomenology and art. Husserl explains how the “natural” attitude and all existential attitudes must be suspended both in phenomenological methodology and in viewing art:

The intuition of a purely aesthetic work of art is enacted under a strict suspension of all existential attitudes of the intellect and of all attitudes relating to emotions and the will which presuppose such an existential attitude. Or more precisely: the work of art places us in (almost forces us into) a state of aesthetic intuition that excludes these attitudes. The
more of the existential world that resounds or is brought to attention, and the more the work of art demands an existential attitude of us out of itself (for instance a naturalistic sensuous appearance: the natural truth of photography), the less aesthetically pure the work is. (To this also belong all kinds of “tendency”.) The natural stance of the mind, the stance of actual life, is “existential” through and through (Husserl, “Letter” 133).

One wonders if Husserl thinks of this “bracketing” out of existential influences as Kantian “disinterestedness,” a topic to be examined ahead. Continuing with the Hofmannstahl letter, Husserl also writes that he prefers not to say anything about Hofmannsthal’s poetry because an artist should be indifferent to praise and scorn. He adds, “And the three golden rules for the artist (in the widest sense), which at the same time are the public secrets of all true greatness, are surely familiar and evident to you: 1) He shall have genius—obviously, otherwise he is not an artist. 2) He shall follow, purely and solely, his daimonion, which, from within, drives him to an intuiting-blind production. 3) Everyone else knows better, thus he observes them all—in a purely aesthetic and phenomenological fashion” (136).

In an essay on the Hofmannsthahl letter, Sven-Olov Wallenstein points out the trope of purity in both Husserl’s phenomenological and aesthetic considerations as well as the Kantian elements reflected or echoed in Husserl’s thoughts about art:

The task of the artist is threefold, Husserl concludes: he must be a genius (once more a Kantian echo: unlike science, art need not account for all of its steps and procedures, and it does not attempt to grasp the
world in concepts); he follows his own *demon*; and he observes the world in a “purely aesthetic and phenomenological fashion”. Together, this demon and this capacity for observation, Husserl suggest, lead to an “intuiting-blind production” (*schauend-blindem Wirken*). The idea of a pure art and a pure phenomenology in this way remain closely tied together, and the first wave of abstraction that emerged at the same time Husserl wrote his letter was one way to articulate this connection. Others would follow, opposing themselves to a certain modernist “purity” by, often unwittingly, drawing on other aspects of the phenomenological heritage, most notably temporality and kinesthesia. The story of these highly complex exchanges remains to be written (Wallenstein 4).\(^5\)

*Epochē* was obviously very much on Husserl’s mind in the Hofmannsthal letter, but that is not surprising given Husserl’s constant attention on and immersion in creating his transcendental phenomenology.

However, some problematic issues exist around Husserl’s comparison between phenomenological principles and neutrality in an aesthetic attitude. Christian Ferencz-Flatz, referencing the Hofmannsthal letter, argues for a separation “between the neutrality of image consciousness, on the one hand, and the disinterestedness of the aesthetic attitude towards reality, on the other hand” (Ferencz-Flatz, Neutrality 477), and Ferencz-Flatz’s argument is detailed and convincing. It is useful to consider at this point Husserl’s *Dürer*. 

\(^5\)Wallenstein, 4.
In *Ideas*, Husserl considers Dürer’s *Knight, Death and the Devil* (*Ritter, Tod und Teufel*) (fig. 3). While describing perception, Husserl notes that through a mental process of “phantasizing consciousness” we simultaneously perceive this world and, via neutrality modification, the phantasized world. He notes, “We can satisfy ourselves with the help of an illustration that the neutrality modification of normal perception which posits its object with unmodified certainty is the neutral consciousness of the picture-object, which we find as a component in our ordinary observation of a depicted situation perceptively presented” (*Ideas* 228).

Husserl then discusses Dürer’s engraving as an example, perceiving first the “engraved print” as a *thing*, and then considering the figures created with the lines of the drawing, including the knight on his horse, “death,” and the “devil” not as objects but as “depicted” realities. The words in emphasis below are Husserl’s:

This *depicturing picture-object* stands before us *neither as being nor as non-being*, nor in any other *positional modality*; or rather, we are aware of it having its being, though only as a quasi-being, in the neutrality modification of Being. But it is just the same with the object depicted, if we take up a *purely aesthetic attitude*, and view the same thing again as “mere picture”, without imparting to it the stamp of |Being or non-Being, of possible Being or probable Being, and the like. But as can clearly be seen, that does not mean any privation, but a modification, that of *neutralization*. Only we should not represent it as a transforming operation carried out on a previous position.
Occasionally indeed it can be this. None the less it need not be it

(Ideas 228-229).

Fig. 3. Albrecht Dürer, *Knight, Death and the Devil (Ritter, Tod und Teufel)*, 1513. Copper engraving 9.6 x 7.5 inches. Prints in Museum of Modern Art, New York, British Museum, and elsewhere.

Husserl’s phrase, “if we take up a *purely aesthetic attitude*” (Husserl’s emphasis) has generated some scholarly debate, including the aforementioned Ferencz-Flatz’s essay, “The Neutrality of Images and Husserlian Aesthetics.” For now, consider that an artist’s root impulse to create a physical work of art in a specific manner can be better understood via a magnified focus on that aesthetic impulse itself. That magnification occurs naturally when using the epochē, or
phenomenological reduction. To bring this into a modern context, as artist-philosophers Borges and Varo bring their intellects to bear on the art-making process while at the same time remaining attuned to intuitive aspects of perception and art-making. Both philosophy and a search for the numinous have influenced these artists in their respective theories of art. Schopenhauer was important to Borges’s thought, for example, so the extent to which a sensibility to the numinous is integrated with the thinking mind of the artist becomes relevant.

Given the ocularcentric premises in Husserl’s phenomenology, that preference for immediate vision and how it lends itself to a phenomenological explication of visual art points to the relevance of Husserl’s “seeing-in” (Hineinschauen) here. As John Brough has emphasized:

Essential to imaging is what Husserl calls “seeing-in” (Hineinschauen). Seeing-in operates in two ways. First, I can see something in the physical support: a human face. In lines drawn in ink on a sheet of paper, for example, or a runner cast in the bronze of a sculpture. Seeing-in carries me beyond the perception of ink and paper or bronze to the consciousness of an image-face or image-body. I can also see something in the image itself, in the sense that I take it to have a subject. Thus I see Bismarck in the image-face before me. This is a case of meaning what is absent—Bismarck himself—in what is actually present and appearing—the image of Bismarck. It is seeing-in that distinguishes image-consciousness from symbolic consciousness, the kind of awareness I have when I recognize an overhead sign in an
airport as indicating the direction of the airport. Images represent things internally. I see the restaurant in the painting of the restaurant and am not carried beyond it. The sign or symbol, on the other hand, represents its subject externally; it points me toward something else that is not contained within it ("Edmund Husserl" 152).

Considering Husserl’s “seeing-in,” one immediately thinks of aesthetic contemplation. This necessarily brings up a need to consider Platonic influences on Husserl, and the distinctions between Platonic ideal entities and Husserlian essences, *eidos*.

**Platonic Influence and Husserlian Essence, Eidos, Eidetic Issues**

Are Husserl’s essences, his *eidos*, ultimately a version of the Platonic world of real forms, perfect essences beyond the world of appearances? Although Husserl denied the validity of accusations of Platonism in his work, he did “credit Bozano’s ‘truths in themselves’ for the original inspiration [in his *Logical Investigations*], and Lotze’s ‘brilliant interpretation of Plato’s doctrine of ideas’ for making it intelligible to him” (Moran and Cohen 257). Regardless, it is difficult to discount the influence of Plato on Husserl in regards to his eidetics: “eidetic insight” and “eidetic intuition” or “essence viewing” or “eidetic seeing” or “essence inspection.” These are all central to his transcendental phenomenology (91).

By *eidos*, Husserl means essence (Drummond 65), and his use of “eidetic reduction” signals one of the ways Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology differs from the phenomenological concepts of some of Husserl’s students, especially the “realistic phenomenologists” in the Munich Circle and the Göttingen Philosophical
Society (64). More pertinent is to consider how the Husserlian version of *eidos* is rooted in Husserl’s foundational principle of epochē and his apophthegmatical maxim, “back to the things themselves.” While Husserl had to take into account both Platonic concepts and the Kantian revision of Platonic concepts, that is especially true of the pivotal issue of the thing-in-itself, rooted as it is in the traditional metaphysical assertion (since Plato) of the thing-in-itself being beyond appearance. Revising both that Platonic concept and Kant’s revision of the Platonic concept, Husserl contends that everything that exists appears; i.e., “the thing in itself appears to us. So there is no distinction between the thing that hides in itself and the thing that appears to me. There is no secluded noumenon hiding behind the mask of the phenomenon. Things show themselves to me, they ‘announce’ or ‘express’ themselves” (Lewis and Staehler 4-5).

Remembering Kant’s historically revolutionary interpretation of the transcendental as “the conditions of possibility for objective knowledge,” or knowledge of the object by the subject, and how that dynamic requires the subject to construct the object, since objects are always objects for a transcendental subject to construct (4-5), helps one to understand Husserl’s revision of both Plato and Kant. The influences of Plato and Kant on both Husserl and Schopenhauer are examined later in Chapter Five.

One might ask the role of emotional expression in this. Both of the artists in this study acknowledged some degree of emotion in art-making. The expressive element in the artist’s aesthetic is driven by the sensibility to the numinous that is initiated by the emotional desire to convey that sensibility via his or her artistic work
in a way that allows image consciousness to become absolute consciousness. If Husserlian intuitions are perceptions or modifications of perception, and intuition indicates a “location” where an intentional object is directly present via that intentionality, when an intention is “filled” by the apprehension of an object, that object is intuited. While the appearance of the object is “given” and the phenomenological reception of the given object is a key element in an artist’s creative dynamic, that artist’s simultaneous intentionality to invoke the numinous via his or her art represents a form of direct apprehension in which a given object fulfills intentionality as an intuition of the object, even when that object is unrecognizable or pre-interpretational. Since the artists being studied here were working to make what is “invisible” visible, an art object arises, a physical object. The “interwoven” aspect of a creative process reveals how intentionality and apprehension yield an intuition of immediate structure as evidence of life in art. I should add that speaking of life in art draws near to the radical Material Phenomenology of Michel Henry, and art as life is considered in more detail in Chapter Six.

On the other hand, can the creative process itself reflect objecthood? And is this an ontological rather than phenomenological issue? Or is it both? Or as Jeff Malpas states this question: “What is the relation between the objectivity of an art work, that is, its material being as an object, and its nature as an artwork? The relation is surely not an irrelevant or contingent one, and yet it is a relationship the nature of which is not at all self-evident” (54).

Subject and object considerations are important in any consideration of a Husserlian aesthetic. In fact, another way of approaching the epochē and a Husserlian
philosophy of art would be to assert, as Milan Uzelac does, that “the essence of classical, modern and postmodern art is the same,” the point of difference being “the way of interpretation of objectification, which is constituted in the creative act” (9).

In relation to this topic, Arvidson notes:

> With Husserl’s *Logical Investigations*, phenomenology established a new sense of the traditional relation between object and subject in philosophy. This doctrine of intentionality in phenomenology asserts that the subject (as consciousness) is already directed toward or involved with an object, when object is understood in the very general sense as anything that is presented. The subject and object are part of a structure of relations in which meaning is revealed between them (125).

As noted earlier, what is closely associated to a search for knowledge is a kind of not-knowing. Although it may be surprising when first encountering Husserl’s work, not-knowing has a role in several ways in Husserlian transcendental phenomenology. Going hand-in-hand with wonder and not-knowing is self-forgetting, which is more than an idea; self-forgetting is an actual experience that challenges the idea of self and its substantiality. The presuppositional notion that subjectivity is a valid label for the separately self-identified individual being may provide some logical sense, but the question to ask is whether that presuppositional interpretation of subjectivity is actually valid or an error that everyone presumes is factual? An error can be factual in the sense that it is an error, but can philosophy go forward if a philosophical concept is rooted in a factual error?
In the next chapter on wonder, we examine in more detail the experience of self-forgetting, which is to say that within the universal experience of wonder the idea of self is erased, albeit temporarily. When Husserl wrote in lecture notes that “aesthetic consciousness [is] essentially connected with the distinction between the consciousness of an object as such and the object’s manner of appearing” (Husserl, *Phantasy, Image Consciousness, and Memory* 459), Husserl could just as well have been addressing Borges’s unknowing of familiar streets in Buenos Aires, or Kandinsky’s anecdote of not knowing his own painting.

Husserl’s work is considered again in Chapter Five in relation to Schopenhauer and other thinkers, and Husserlian transcendental phenomenological topics and concepts are applied specifically to the work of Varo and Borges in Chapter Six.
Chapter Two—Wonder as Disruption: Subjectivity and Not-knowing

Although the importance of wonder and its relevance to philosophy and art was described in the introduction, this chapter proposes to elucidate in more detail how the phenomenon or experience of wonder is directly related to a sensibility to the numinous. Given that the title of this study begins with the phrase *The Numinous Gate*, it is imperative to clarify what that phrase means. If one of the characteristics of the numinous is its invisibility, how could a “gate” appear? At the risk of oversimplification, it must be noted that the argument here is not that a physical or even imaginary gate visually appears. While saying the numinous is a gate is obviously intended metaphorically (although a verbal metaphor can initiate a visualized rendering), the point is that the numinous becomes accessible via a seeming rupture in what we presume is consciousness or so-called reality, and this rupture or disruptive phenomenon is what can be described as wonder.

Investigating the role of wonder in the irreal fabulism of Remedios Varo and Jorge Luis Borges requires a suspension of presuppositional concepts such as linearity, conventional appearance, and spatial-temporal presumptions. In other words, a form of epochê, described in the last chapter, is required. Whether or not a reader or viewer consciously creates such a bracketing or a suspension of belief is a secondary point, because that epochê requirement is not essentially manipulative even if consciously generated; the primary point is the process that occurs subsequently to a suspension of belief. In a Husserlian sense, wonder is spontaneously “given” to consciousness along with wonder’s accompanying “not-knowing” and “self-
forgetting” qualities. Wonder ushers in a distinctly disruptive experience that is a universal yet nonetheless subjectively accentuated phenomenon, and the seemingly paradoxical condition of subjectivity joined with universality indicates the challenge of even discussing the nature of wonder and the numinous. That the experience of wonder can serve or at least influence art-making seems to be only marginally or peripherally acknowledged in scholarly studies. This is partly because wonder, in spite of its universality, is difficult to investigate—partly because of its inherent relationship with subjectivity but also due to its spontaneously abrupt, immediate and often unrecognizable appearance in the midst of one’s quotidian life.

**Experiencing Wonder**

Before examining the aesthetic and philosophical significance of wonder, it is useful to consider the experience of wonder itself. There are many definitions of wonder in the Oxford English Dictionary. The primary definition of wonder is: “Something that causes astonishment” ("wonder, n." I). Other definitions relevant to this study include: “An astonishing occurrence, event, or fact; a surprising incident; a wonderful thing” ("wonder, n." I,4), and “The emotion excited by the perception of something novel and unexpected, or inexplicable; astonishment mingled with perplexity or bewildered curiosity. Also, the state of mind in which this emotion exists; an instance of this, a fit of wonderment” ("wonder, n." II,7, a). These three definitions can be combined and used to understand the meaning of wonder as a noun or what it is in its substantive form. Essentially it is a surprising event or thing that causes astonishment, and in some cases causes a strong emotional response to the astonishing event or the thing in itself. Most uses of the noun wonder pivot around the
experience of wonder as astonishment. Another relevant definition addresses the verbal use of wonder, essentially as a question or an expression of doubt: “To ask oneself in wonderment; to feel some doubt or curiosity (how, whether, why, etc.); to be desirous to know or learn” ("wonder, v." 2). The verb wonder is closest to a philosophical usage, if someone, for example, wonders about the nature of reality; the usage of the verb wonder is closest to scientific use if, for example, someone wonders if a certain container of water is pure H2O. The two approaches are sometimes intertwined, as when someone sees something inexplicable and is stunned by astonishment, then starts considering whether this or that factor initiated or caused the logically inexplicable event. For example, seeing a rainbow for the first time is usually followed by asking what the phenomenon is or to wonder how it happened; however, the first and most apropos or pertinent response is the experience of astonishment.

Even though a primary point of this study is to accentuate and explicate the power of wonder as an unusual, albeit universal, state of consciousness, wonder must be elucidated in a philosophico-phenomenological context. While so-called New Age and occult anecdotes and assertions can be entertaining and even to some extent useful, keeping wonder in a bubble of magical possibility is one reason wonder has been to some extent circumvented or ignored by contemporary philosophy. A major purpose in this dissertation is to philosophically and phenomenologically legitimize or at least make philosophically accessible topics like wonder and the numinous, and the artistic impulse to communicate the numinous. Wonder and the numinous are not
nonsense; they are critically significant topics, albeit the kind of topics that are
difficult to understand because of their inherently ineffable, amorphous qualities.

Encountering a rainbow is only one of the more common examples of an
experience of wonder. Other examples might include meeting an extraterrestrial
being, a distinctively different and unfamiliar life form, or waking up and finding
oneself to be a cockroach instead of a human being—as did Franz Kafka’s literary
protagonist, the salesman Gregor Samsa, who finds himself somehow transformed
overnight into a large and monstrous insect in Kafka’s 1915 novella, *Die
Verwandlung*, translated as *The Metamorphosis* or *The Transformation*. Kafka’s
work, in fact, has also been used as an example of irreal fabulism.

**The Universality of Wonder**

Prior to art and scholarship—although related to both—is the role of wonder
in humankind’s collective experience. As every parent or kindergarten teacher knows,
for example, young children have no problem allowing or expressing spontaneous
and genuinely amazed wonder many times in one day. If a young child is seeing an
elephant for the first time without any preconception of what an elephant is in
conventional terms, that child is unlikely to suppress a sense of amazement. He or she
may subsequently ask what this creature is or why it has such a long “nose,” but the
initial state of wonder simply occurs spontaneously in a form of not-knowing.
Furthermore, even an adult who presumes to know what an elephant is but lives in a
society where elephants are rarely seen can be astonished when seeing an elephant up
close. That astonishment, even if momentary, is a form of wonder and not-knowing.

In his discussion of wonder and learning, Philip Fisher describes how wonder
is related to three elements, “by suddenness, by the moment of first seeing, and by the visual presence of the whole state or object” (21). He goes on to say that within the arts, only those available as a whole visual experience in an instant, such as a painting or sculpture, can offer the complete absence of expectation (21).

Whether one agrees or disagrees with Fisher in regards to wonder and art, the phenomenon of wonder does undermine expectation, whether the expectation is to understand the phenomenon or to gain knowledge as information. One aspect of the present argument is to reveal how artists incorporate wonder as an aesthetic means to create their art. This has been investigated relatively infrequently, at least in a direct sense, although related topics have been explicated; it is more commonly presumed, for example, that one function of the artist is to serve human perception, to enable us to see more directly (Maine 151-163). There are countless examples of this function, whether in the work of William Blake, Paul Cézanne, Rainer Maria Rilke, Henri Matisse, Mark Rothko, Wallace Stevens, Agnes Martin, and Wassily Kandinsky, to use some established examples, or, as are primarily the cases here, in the art of Jorge Luis Borges and Remedios Varo. While artists as purveyors of perception and wonder will be examined in more detail in the next chapter about the numinous, as well as in Chapter Six about Varo and Borges as artist-philosophers, it should be noted here that some philosophers also discuss this theme:

Wonder, Wittgenstein tells us, gives us the ability to see the world as a “limited whole,” in other words, sub specie aeternitatis. Wittgenstein writes in his notebooks that such a globalized wonder is usually the provenance of the artist: “the aesthetic miracle [Wunder] is that the
world exists. In *Culture and Value*, he suggests that since philosophy opens with wonder, it can also “capture the world” from a heavenly perspective: “Thought has such a way—so I believe—it is as though it flies above the world and leaves it as it is, observing it from above, in flight” (Rubenstein, 124).

Wittgenstein’s approach to wonder and the ineffable is similar to Schopenhauer’s, and it is interesting, though perhaps not widely known, that Schopenhauer’s writings influenced Wittgenstein (Cahill 26). Wittgenstein, for example, is, like Schopenhauer, not intimidated or repulsed by a notion of the mystical: “There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They make themselves manifest. They are what is mystical” (Cahill 19).

**Wonder as Rupture and Hinge**

To return to the fundamental question of how wonder is related to the numinous, Jerome Miller’s proposal that wonder is a hinge (33-51), a metaphor he borrows from Derrida (33), also works here. While wonder is a disruption, a kind of rupture that is best understood phenomenologically, the implications include how the numinous can sometimes be accessed via art. This may also be a factor behind why so many western artists have been interested in eastern philosophy and spirituality. It is not difficult to understand why artists have been attracted to eastern ideas and practices—engaging, contemplating and depicting the infinitely shifting terrain of subjectivity and the invisible influence of the numinous in art-making might lend itself more to an Eastern philosophical approach because in Asian philosophy a metaphorical rendering of the variations and fluctuations of aesthetic consciousness
and subjectivity in regards to wonder has been described as a “gateless gate.” While Continental philosophy is referenced and accentuated in this paper, both European and Asian thought can be referenced to support the argument that Varo and Borges’s irrealistic narratives challenge any immutable account of truth and reality in art.

**Performance-assisted Subjective Process, the Numinous and Wonder**

One useful term in a consideration of the role of subjectivity in art is “performance-assisted subjective process,” a phrase coined by artist and author Adi Da Samraj to describe audience participation in a work of art, indicating that each individual goes through his or her own inward (or subjective) course of response to a performance or artwork presented. The artwork itself, then, is moved beyond being an objectified thing, becoming instead a means of assisting in a transformation of consciousness in the participant (Adi Da Samraj 240).

What, then, are the implications of a sensibility to the numinous whether for the artist or for the viewer or reader? First, related to the performance-assisted subjective process are the observations by artists as well-known as Marcel Duchamp that a work of art is not completed until the viewer receives and interacts with the art:

> In the creative act, the artist goes from intention to realization through a chain of totally subjective reactions. His struggle toward the realization is a series of efforts, pains, satisfaction, refusals, decisions, which also cannot and must not be fully self-conscious, at least on the esthetic plane. The result of this struggle is a difference between the intention and its realization, a difference that the artist is not aware of. All in all, the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the
spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualification and thus adds his contribution to the creative act (Duchamp 3).

A more phenomenological way of saying this is that until an art object is given to the viewer in consciousness, it does not exist. If the glamor inherent in the cultural recognition of an individual artist’s accomplishments are set aside, bracketed out, who is more important, the artist or the viewer, the writer or the reader? There is a kind of intersubjectivity at work here that defies or at least challenges the notion of separative self-identification. That wonder invites a sensibility to the numinous, or makes visible the invisibility of what is called here the numinous gate, again is a highly participatory phenomenon.

The aesthetic and philosophical significance of the phenomenon of wonder, which itself often arises in response to a variety of strange or startling phenomena, or in response to perplexing or seemingly unanswerable questions, is a factor in some, if not most, art. That the experience of wonder sometimes overflows into peripheral areas described as mysticism, occultism, magic or theology signals the complex challenge of bringing a scholarly orientation to wonder and the numinous, as well as to examining responses to wonder. The first step in the examination of wonder begun in the introduction is to accentuate the inverse of not-knowing, unknowing, self-forgetting and doubt—knowing itself, a subject investigated far more frequently in philosophy. What is knowledge, or knowing, and to what extent can knowledge be explained? In fact, can knowledge be “explained” at all? Formulating this last question tacitly acknowledges the array of approaches to knowledge. Thinking about
knowledge and knowing leads one back into a distinctly human milieu, because before examining knowledge, one must consider more specifically what subjectivity is, what the knower knowing actually denotes. What is different here is to consider how subjectivity is impacted by its encounter with the disruption of wonder, and what are the ramifications of that encounter? One aspect of responding to that question is related to the inherent heterogeneity of subjectivity.

Subject and Subjectivity

The modernist/postmodernist divide in art reflects, among other issues, disparate assessments and theories of subjectivity. The contemporary art world (which often reflects contemporary thought) sometimes roots itself in a poststructuralist foundation that defines different uses of the word “subject”:

Most obviously, the word [“subject”] simply implies a “subject”—in the sense of a “topic”—under discussion or being represented. But more to the point here, it suggests the idea of a human subjectivity. “Subject” is preferred to “self” because “self” is likely to be taken to suggest an essentialist notion of subjectivity that is antithetical to poststructuralist and other contemporary thinking. The word “subject” also evokes the idea of being subject to a larger force or forces: a king, a dictator, or a totalitarian state, perhaps. Of course, in the poststructuralist world the larger force to which one is subject is not an individual or human agency, but language itself, which contains all of us in its prisonhouse, makes subjects of us all. Finally, “subject suggests the idea of the grammatical “subject” of a sentence. One is
made a subject when one is represented in language, hailed by ideology, constructed as a subject, and subjected to the force of representation” (Gaggi, *From Text to Hypertext*, xii).

This excerpt is excellent and relevant in that it points to why the thematic direction of this paper is not rooted in contemporary poststructuralist thought. While the excerpt above clearly expresses a scholarly tone in which the content is valid in regards to current aesthetic trends, this paper is rooted in a distinctively different approach to subjectivity, one that may be considered invalid by some contemporary thinkers but that is nonetheless aligned with this author’s experiences and subsequent years of conclusions from studying and explicating those experiences. To say, as Silvio Gaggi does (xii), that language “contains all of us in its prisonhouse” and denigrates human subjects or positions humans to be dominated by a larger force, be it grammatical or sociopolitical, is virtually the opposite assertion of the present thesis.

This in no way should be interpreted to mean that the work of many modern scholars who engaged the study of language—Wittgenstein, Derrida, Barthes, and others—has been invalid or not valuable; their work has been validated and is of course valuable. In fact, it is also important to note that Jorge Luis Borges and many other writers, including Derrida and Barthes, have challenged the idea that language is a subjective enclosure. Borges’s fictional and nonfictional intertextuality and unrealistic narratives undermine fixed notions of language and reflect an intention to ignore and circumnavigate immutable concepts of subjectivity. When Borges, discussing how H.G. Wells insisted that human beings take precedence over ideas
about human beings, responds “with the nominalist Hume, that very person is equally plural and consists of a series of perceptions; or with Plutarch, ‘Nobody is what he was, or will be what he is now’; or with Heraclitus, ‘No one steps into the same river twice’” (*Selected Non-Fictions* 212), he circumvents fixed ideas of self, and reaffirms the reality of fluctuating, pluralistic subjectivities. Is a Borgesian subjectivity a temporally rooted subjectivity? Perhaps. In a famously beautiful passage from his essay “A new Refutation of Time,” Borges concludes:

> Time is the substance of which I am made. Time is a river that sweeps me along, but I am the river; it is a tiger that mangles me, but I am the tiger; it is a fire that consumes me, but I am the fire. The world, unfortunately, is real; I, unfortunately, am Borges (*Selected Non-Fictions* 322).

Likewise with Remedios Varo’s visual representations of subjectivity—she repeatedly challenges through her fabulist paintings the idea of conventional subjectivity and considers the self as a means or avenue to transcending not just conventional ideas of visual representation, but the sometimes uninspected conceptual exclusivities imprisoning and solidifying the self. Her paintings often reflect fragmented versions of herself, and especially express her seeking to understand herself as a journey.

**Searches for Knowledge**

Is knowledge, then, something that only thought can address, or that can be experienced only through discursive ideas? This seems unlikely, given the history, for example, of the varieties of esoteric spirituality and their promulgated experiential
teachings of alternative states of consciousness. In fact, some of the world’s greatest Asian scholars and aestheticians have simultaneously been spiritual practitioners. For example, Abhinavagupta (950-1020 AD) was one of India’s greatest philosophers, mystics and aestheticians, as well as an important musician, poet, dramatist, exegete, theologian, and logician – a polymath, and a man whose voracious appetite for knowledge and learning was legendary.\(^{59}\)

While any claim to a global approach for art should take into account the many Eastern philosophies of art and aesthetics—as, to some limited extent, did both Borges and Varo’s art—this dissertation for the most part remains within the admittedly Eurocentric context of Continental philosophy. The primary eastern philosopher referenced here, besides Abhinavagupta, is Adi Shankara, who lived 788–820 AD. There is a relevant reason for referencing Adi Shankara, a scholar and spiritual teacher who studied and wrote about the *Upanishads*, a text that deeply influenced Arthur Schopenhauer. In fact, the *Upanishads* was reportedly the only text that Schopenhauer kept continually on his desk.\(^{60}\) Borges, in turn, was greatly influenced by the writings of Schopenhauer. Adi Shankara, also known as Sankara Bhagavatpadacarya and Adi Sankaracarya, remains one of the most important Hindu philosophers; besides his studies and writings about the *Upanishads*, he synthesized and rejuvenated the doctrine of Advaita Vedanta, a multi-faceted philosophical and religious system that argues for a nondualistic orientation to consciousness.

The point here is that knowledge is not a Western exclusivity, and that Eastern thought can be merged with a study that is primarily rooted in Western philosophy.\(^{61}\) There is no reason for an investigation of knowledge and art to be restricted to
geography or cultural identification. Questioning is a universal human characteristic. Considering the fact that Arthur Schopenhauer was the first major European philosopher to openly reference Asian philosophical and spiritual writings beyond a cursory mention, and that Borges repeatedly expressed a lifelong admiration for Schopenhauer’s writings, vindicates an acknowledgement of Schopenhauer’s philosophy in this study, and in this chapter at least, a mention of Schopenhauer and wonder.

**Schopenhauer and Wonder**

David Cartwright’s summary of Schopenhauer’s position regarding religion, that of a self-described atheist, is clarifying and signals several preeminent points comprising the Schopenhauerian aesthetic argument as well as the present orientation here:

Schopenhauer did not subscribe to a religion, and he was an atheist. Still, he took a lively interest in the religions of the world. That he would do so is not surprising, since he saw a strong kinship between philosophy and religion, and also a natural antagonism. He held that both philosophical and religious systems attempt to address a deep human need for metaphysics. He attributed this need to a sense of wonder or astonishment, one that arises from the recognition of the ubiquity of suffering and death within the world (145).

If Schopenhauer’s work was characterized by a sense of wonder, his aesthetic also points to the liberating dynamic of contemplating art, a dynamic that generates
self-forgetting and freedom from the devastating drive of the will. His aesthetic is—through the contemplation of art—rooted in a sense of wonder.

**Wonder, the Night Sky, and the Circle**

A particular form of wonder in nature that humankind has long recognized, and that has been and continues to be a creative force in art, including in modernist visual art, is space, and especially the night sky. Probably the most famous modern painting of the night sky is post-impressionist painter Vincent van Gogh’s *The Starry Night* (fig. 4).

![The Starry Night by Vincent van Gogh](image)

*Fig. 4. Vincent van Gogh, *The Starry Night* (Dutch: *De sterrennacht*), 1889. Oil on canvas, 29 x 39 ¼ in. Museum of Modern Art, New York.*

Voluntarily confined in 1889 to a hospital in the town of Saint-Remy northeast of Arles in southern France (Silverman 393), Van Gogh painted (during the day from memory) the night view from his sanitarium room window. Although Van Gogh was suffering intensely at this time, *The Starry Night* has been described as a work that “sums up his religious journey in a triumphant vision of the mystical union
with God” (Erickson 79). In this painting Van Gogh depicts, in visual aesthetic terms (albeit visual terms fueled by an intense emotional state) a dynamic of the linear becoming curvilinear with arciform shapes spinning into circles of light to express the beauty and wonder of the night sky.

The circle in artmaking can be—at least in specific cases—an aesthetic element that signals a sensibility to the numinous. This line-becoming-circle dynamic is echoed repeatedly in art, and while such usage does not always claim a spiritual significance, it sometimes, on the other hand, acknowledges exactly that significance. With the advent of modernist non-objective abstraction, however, one might expect a diluting of that sensibility, especially given the absence of the recognizable visual human root of more representational abstraction. Yet here again the issue of quotidian context and wonder arises.

While the topic of nonobjective abstraction is covered in Chapter Four: Seeking the Numinous in Modernist Art, it needs to be emphasized here that nonobjective abstraction does reflect a different (albeit related) orientation to expressing a sensibility to the numinous. Whereas Borges and Varo, while working in an irreal narratology, almost always include the human being via a representational motif, nonobjective abstraction purports to reveal some version of the absolute, which need not include any references to the human entity. Nonetheless, a sense of wonder can easily arise when viewing and contemplating a nonobjective abstract work of art.

What is it, then, that one is seeing? What is being expressed or not expressed? One aspect of this is that nonobjective abstraction is in some sense a more directly perceived and experienced occasion of wonder because, to put it in the colloquial, the
viewer does not know what the picture is, what it is about, or what it has to do with human identification. If a child inspects a work of nonobjective abstraction, what is that child going to “see”? Patterns, lines, colors? An adult who is versed in art history may immediately bring presuppositional information to viewing a piece, or to invert that thought, an artist may be influenced by a philosopher’s concept, or his or her own philosophical concept. The point is that a kind of not-knowing can occur with nonobjective abstraction as well as irreal fabulism, a point that signals how not-knowing is germane to wonder in the sense of wonder as amazement or awe.

To extend this in visual and textual intertextual context, it is relevant that Schopenhauer’s thought does influence Kandinsky (among other artists) in several ways. “As a thinker, Kandinsky was highly eclectic, and his discussion of color theory in On the Spiritual in Art is deeply influenced by the optical studies of Goethe and Schopenhauer” (Lindsay 116).

Not only color, but the use of geometric and other forms may be accentuated through various ideas. Kandinsky’s uses of the circle are evident especially in, among other works, two paintings, Several Circles (fig 5) and Composition 8 (fig. 23, p.173) and, and point to what the contemporary Guggenheim Museum curator Nancy Spector describes as the significance of Kandinsky’s art and aesthetic while he was working at Weimar Bauhaus:

Originally premised on a Germanic, expressionistic approach to artmaking, the Bauhaus aesthetic came to reflect Constructivist concerns and styles, which by the mid-1920s had become international in scope. While there, Kandinsky furthered his investigations into the
correspondence between colors and forms and their psychological and spiritual effects. In Composition 8 (fig. 23, p.173) the colorful, interactive geometric forms create a pulsating surface that is alternately dynamic and calm, aggressive and quiet. The importance of circles in this painting prefigures the dominant role they would play in many subsequent works, culminating in his cosmic and harmonious image Several Circles. “The circle,” claimed Kandinsky, “is the synthesis of the greatest oppositions. It combines the concentric and the eccentric in a single form and in equilibrium. Of the three primary forms, it points most clearly to the fourth dimension” (Spector).

Fig. 5. Wassily Kandinsky. Several Circles (Einige Kreise), 1926. Oil on canvas, 55 1/4 × 55 3/8 inches, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

Regardless of Kandinsky’s conscious intention, his Several Circles might be
interpreted as a “night sky” or as an expression of astronomical deep space. Spector’s comments above echo the description of H.H. Arnason, who notes that in *Several Circles* “the transparent color circles float serenely across one another above an indeterminate gray-black ground, like planets orbiting through space. It is hardly surprising that the artist revered the circle as a ‘link with the cosmos’ and as a form that ‘points most clearly to the fourth dimension’ ” (Arnason 355). Earlier, Arnason wrote a more emphatic assessment of how Kandinsky considered the circle to be an expression of the spiritual:

Kandinsky fervently believed that abstract forms were invested with great significance and expressive power, and the spiritual basis of his abstract forms set him apart from Bauhaus teachers like Moholy-Nagy. “The contact of the acute angle of a triangle with a circle,” he wrote, “is no less powerful in its effect than that of the finger of God with the finger of Adam in Michelangelo’s [*Creation of Man*] painting.” The circle, in particular, was filled with “inner potentialities” for the artist, and it took on a prominent role in his work of the twenties (354-355).

To continue with Schopenhauer and wonder, it would be difficult to discuss Schopenhauer without referencing Kant. While discussing Kant’s two sublimes (the mathematical sublime and the dynamical sublime) in a context that includes aesthetic contemplation, Schopenhauer, as Kant did before him in *Critique of Practical Reason* (WWP1 252), notes with reverence and admiration the overwhelming beauty of the starry night sky. However, unlike Kant, Schopenhauer acknowledges a more detailed connection:
When we lose ourselves in contemplation of the infinite magnitude of the world in space and time, reflect on the millennia that flowed past and on those to come—or indeed, when the night sky actually brings countless worlds before our eyes, and thus impresses the immensity of the world upon our consciousness—we feel ourselves reduced to nothingness, feel ourselves as individual, as animate body, as transitory phenomenon of will, vanishing like a drop in the ocean, dissipating into nothingness (251).

That both Kant and Schopenhauer bring up the immensity of space points again to humankind’s fascination and wonder with the night sky. All one has to do is to look upwards to allow wonder to arise in consciousness. Sophia Vasalou argues that “Schopenhauer’s own analysis of the sublime” combines with “a therapeutic of wonder at its heart—a therapeutic of the passions that is simultaneously a therapeutic of the subjectivity that underpins them” (Schopenhauer 5).

Both Borges’ intellectual character and his layered fabulist writings and poetry are reflected, so to speak, in the complexity and beauty of the night sky, which one might say reflects the wonder that fuels so much of Borges’ literary vision. Similarly, numerous Varo paintings also refer to the stars, the sky, and space, often as background in paintings depicting other subjects, and sometimes obliquely intertwined with philosophical meaning that influences human lives, as in her Three Destinies (fig. 6), a work Varo commented on:

Each of these three characters is peacefully doing what he wants to, oblivious to the others; but there is a complicated machine from which come pulleys that wind around them and make them move (they think
they move freely). In turn, the machine is propelled by a pulley connect to a star in the sky that moves the whole apparatus. The star represents the destiny of these people, and although they are not aware of it, their destinies are intertwined: one day their lives will cross (Ovalle 113).

![Fig. 6. Remedios Varo. *Three Destinies (Tres destinos)*, 1956. Oil on Masonite, 35 3/8 x 42 ½ in. Private collection.](image)

One theme reflected by Varo’s art and art commentary is the human connection to the cosmos, accentuating how people’s lives are not alienated from the
night sky, from the unknown, or from wonder itself. As noted elsewhere, Borges and Varo virtually always reference the human being in the midst of their art. Varo’s *Star Catcher* (fig. 7) magnifies this concept.

Fig. 7. Remedios Varo. *Star Catcher (Cazadora de astros)*, 1956. Mixed media on paper; 18 ¾ x 13 3/8 in. Private Collection.
Questioning and Explaining Wonder

The history of Western philosophy notes some master questioners among the great thinkers, from Socrates to Wittgenstein and beyond. Wittgenstein, certainly a preeminent investigator of knowledge, wrote, “Explanations come to an end somewhere” [“Die Erklärungen haben irgendwo ein Ende.”] (Philosophical Investigations 6).

To extend this farther and with more specificity within the present study, artists, philosophers, and artist-philosophers do use the experience of wonder as an entryway into expressing through their work a sensibility to the numinous. To shine a light of scholarly explication onto a seemingly inexplicable or ineffable thematic territory without automatically accessing logical presuppositional theories of knowledge is, to say the least, challenging, but the challenge works in both directions as well. In short, to formulate the questions that will enrich and illuminate the thematic territory surrounding each question necessarily requires the questioner to challenge the limitations inherent in the question itself, and in the questioner himself or herself.

Several factors work to prevent or obstruct the challenging of a question’s inherent limitations. One is the concept of objectivity, and the second, clearly daunting factor is the role of science in human culture. If a scholarly approach to a theme or topic consists of being objective, or not influenced by personal feelings, then subjectivity is unapproachable. Yet that cannot be—subjectivity is the initial gateway to all philosophical and spiritual thought, and in fact to any thought whatsoever. The real question is whether or not scientific orientations alone can lead
to an excavation of truth.

**Scientific Materialism**

At this point in contemporary society the belief in the automatic validity of science is so prevalent that scientific factual knowledge has in some ways become an almost fundamentalist, unquestionable belief system, one that ushers the individual into a theatre filled with a passive and in some cases quasi-religious audience. This orientation amounts to what can be described as scientific materialism. While scientific proofs, thoughts, and ideas clearly have significantly useful places in the thinker’s toolbox, or the artist’s paint box, metaphorically speaking, acknowledging science as an infallible and exclusive revelation of “objective” knowledge creates a mythological *idol* of scientifically validated factual objectivity that can become, at its most distant borders, a close-minded exclusivity. The argument here is that if scientific objectivity and logic-rooted factual validity are the only tools in one’s toolbox, the phenomenon and experience of wonder can be easily dismissed and discarded as invalid or irrelevant to humankind and truth.

Yet wonder cannot be completely dismissed because it is a universal human experience. Wonder is a key element in both artistic creativity and the philosophical understanding of aesthetics, as well as in philosophical inquiry in general; this is neither a new idea nor a radical discovery, even though it “is relatively under-represented in the scholarship” (Deckard xvii). Among the varieties of wonder, the forms most relevant to this study are those rooted in, first, astonishment and awe, and secondly, what can be interrupted as perplexity and doubt—both of which are presented here as forms or modifications of “not-knowing.”
Related to objectivity is the subject-object dichotomy, which is frequently a presuppositionally referenced concept, and not necessarily a valid idea. It certainly appears to be a valid presupposition: there is this “me” and the rest of the world, but the validity of that idea has long been questioned. One must challenge the validity of the subject-object dichotomy to even begin to effectively inspect what knowing and a knower are. Thus the subjective self is a vehicle to a broader landscape. Part of the argument herein is that when a state of wonder is not suppressed for one reason or another, it can eventually initiate a search for the numinous. Before that search can even begin, however, one must necessarily fully allow wonder and its attendant not-knowing to manifest instead of instantly explaining wonder away with scientific materialist facts.

Mary Midgley, using a parable by Jesus that itself uses the example of the interior motivation of a merchantman seeking and buying pearls, addresses the issue of expectation and knowledge, proposing that wonder involves more than factual information:

Of late, scientists have been so anxious to exclude irrelevant, outward sorts of usefulness from the value of science that they do not easily notice this point. Yet it must surely be central. Unless the merchantman merely wants that pearl to sell again, he wants do something with it. He wants, it seems, to enter into relation with it, to wonder at it, to contemplate its beauty. But wonder involves love. It is an essential element in wonder that we recognize what we see as something we did not make, cannot fully understand, and acknowledge
as containing something greater than ourselves. This is not only true if our subject matter is the stars; it is notoriously just as true if it is rocks or nematode worms (41).

While this example veers into theological thought, which this study, for the most part, disclaims, the point to make is that the experience of wonder can be more than an isolated experience in that it may influence one’s orientation to and assessment of life and the world. Wonder may, in fact, represent one of the most powerful motivators in science, and it may be wonder not at a single object or phenomenon, but to the sheer range of direct, non-theoretical experience:

Darwin’s success had a great deal to do with the larger spirit of empiricism—with a ready acceptance of the richness of experience, and a refusal to distort it by premature intrusion of theory. What distinguished Darwin from the innumerable scholars who were wrangling in his youth about the relations between different life-forms—and more especially from the Continental scholars—was his direct, undisputatious, fascinated absorption in the range of facts that the natural world laid before him. On the voyage of the Beagle, he was not looking for something that he could use to support a theory. He was absorbed in the wonder [my emphasis] at the immense range and variety of the life-forms that he saw (Midgley 201).

Thus the pursuits of science per se are not problematic. The problem is one of presupposition and application, the presumption and expectation that a purity of investigation (and this more of an idea about purity rather than the essence of purity
itself) disallows invisible, non-linear, and only factual elements. While many scientists would never go so far as using Husserl’s epochē to bracket out specific presuppositions in their investigations, often a kind over inverted bracketing happens through theoretical presuppositions, such as the presumption of the invalidity, or at least the irrelevance of wonder. In the context of this study, that is an error: “If thinking is our professional concern, then wisdom and wonder are our business; information-storage, though often useful, is just an incidental convenience” (Midgley 253).

This does not mean that scientific fact has no role or value, or that thinking should be disallowed. In fact, if there is a primary principle in Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology, it is that his work and all philosophy should reflect an immaculate scientific rigor, albeit a Husserlian scientific rigor. Nonetheless, in the face of spontaneous wonder, initial thoughts sans presuppositional prejudices must be established. If wonder and not-knowing are allowed and presented to consciousness without presuming scientifically materialistic or religiously consoling explanations, an egress from the confines of preconceptual thinking is formed, opening onto a more directly experiential and penetrating explication of wonder. Experience, in fact, is another key element in Husserlian thought and intention.

No claim is made as to this study to being a conventional or purely logical orientation to investigating knowledge. What is claimed and investigated is that wonder, not-knowing, and a sensibility to the numinous must be considered and investigated in an open-minded and scholarly approach if the essential value of acknowledging, exploring and communicating knowledge itself is to be understood
and communicated. In other words, in regards to mystery and the invisible, it is not useful to dismiss those elements as automatically invalid ideas impenetrable to scholarly investigation. Varo and Borges were chosen specifically because their work does not dismiss mystery and the invisible as impenetrable; they acknowledged, excavated, and presented the phenomena through their art, albeit in highly individualistic styles.

This approach to knowledge is described in detail by Ariane Mildenberg through her examination of Virginia Woolf’s “The Mark on the Wall” (“Openings” 41-69). While doing so, Mildenberg unearths an analogous response to wonder and not-knowing—doubt. Mildenberg’s referencing of Woolf gives a sense of the conjunction of art and wonder in regards to doubt and not-knowing.

At the end of the story, the narrator offers a final variation of the mark: “Ah, the mark on the wall! It was a snail.” But having offered various possibilities as to what the mark could be, the finality of this last remark cannot but be doubtful. In fact, this sense of doubt is triggered by the short story’s opening sentence—“Perhaps it was in the middle of January in the present year that I first looked and saw the mark on the wall”—preventing us from ever reaching a believable identification of the mark: “as for that mark, I’m not sure about it, I don’t believe it was made by a nail [sic] after all” (“Openings” 55).

Mildenberg continues, first quoting Husserl, “‘The attempt to doubt everything has its place in the realm of our perfect freedom […] the attempt to doubt any object of awareness in respect of its being actually there necessarily conditions
certain suspension [Aufhebung] of the thesis; and it is precisely this that interest us’ ” (“Openings” 55).  
Mildenberg also points out that Maurice Natanson, in his study of Husserl (“Openings” 55-56), suggests that humans have a taken for granted attitude to life, a “natural standpoint” that has “suspended our abilities to wonder in the face of the object” (55). Natanson also argues that Husserl’s reduction (epochē) also leads the perceiver back to the dimension of “primordial doubt or wonder” (Natanson 54).

The nature and ultimate significance of Husserlian primordial doubt is too complex to explicate in detail here. Nonetheless, in the present context doubt is presented as a response to phenomena, whether in the form of philosophical questioning or as a means of epochē or the suspension of belief rooted in preconception. Natanson does attempt to clarify the general ramification of primordial doubt, epochē, and wonder:

The immanent suspension of primordial doubt is the obverse side of the general thesis of the natural attitude. The suspension assures the indomitable faith of everyday man in the actuality of his world and helps to explain his refusal to take seriously the philosopher’s argument about realism and solipsism. Such discussions are recognized as clever and entertaining but not as part and parcel of the truth of daily life. Yet philosophy does arise, there is wonder, and we do have recourse to the kind of radical reflection which Husserl proposed. Despite the apparent insularity of common sense to primordial doubt, daily existence swarms with possibilities, among them the self-illumination of mundanity (56).
An objective skepticism or philosophical doubt naturally arises in tandem with the type of wonder characterized by perplexity, or the question that seeks the true answer. While the majority of philosophers understand the purposes and value of doubt as a form of questioning, perhaps fewer thinkers write about the broader significance of wonder in questioning. Nonetheless, numerous great thinkers emphasized the critical significance of wonder, including a master of questioning, Ludwig Wittgenstein, who famously wrote, “Man has to awaken to wonder—and so perhaps do peoples. Science is a way of sending him to sleep again” (*Culture 5e*).70

**Wonder and Not-knowing**

A central theme of wonder, and a preliminary consideration here is to look at how an association between wonder and not-knowing surfaces.

The salient point is that wonder is an essential factor in life, in philosophy, in art and in the philosophy of art, and that wonder includes an element, and an experience, of not-knowing. Prior to art and scholarship (although related to both) is the role of wonder in humankind’s collective experience of knowing and not-knowing. Unless “knowing” can be put aside at certain junctures, one remains in a maze of recurring conceptual thought that disallows any inner experience. This is the real value of the artist-philosopher, whose artistic activity within the larger context of life (art for life’s sake) challenges seemingly impenetrable labyrinthine qualities of the conceptual maze. Bracketing out presuppositional knowledge in order to step directly into “inner experience” requires less of an analytical approach and more of an oblique, less categorical orientation. That art history remains addicted to categories, hierarchies, definitions and other fixed divisions is both amusing and oppressive.
Artist-philosophers such as Borges and Varo challenge not only categories and linear thought, but perceptual and narratological boundaries as well. Few artist-philosophers could accomplish this seemingly oblique approach as did Bataille, whose attraction to mysticism includes a dislike of the word mysticism, and whose passionate resistance to definitions and the limitations of discursive thought (instances below of italic emphasis are Bataille’s) remains always evident:

By inner experience, I understand what one usually calls mystical experience: states of ecstasy, of ravishment, at least of meditated emotion. But I am thinking less of confessional experience, to which one has had to hold oneself hitherto, than of a bare experience, free of ties, of an origin, to any confession whatsoever. This is why I don’t like the world mystical (Inner Experience 9).

To release inner experience from what Bataille describes above as “confessional experience” in order to allow “bare experience” also opens the door to the numerous aspects of subjectivity and perception. Merleau-Ponty, whose work pivots from and beyond the work of Edmund Husserl, addresses some features of this territory while writing about the distinctions between perception and thought, as well as some of their conjunctions and reciprocal exchanges. However, he also makes clear by the very title of one of his books, The Primacy of Perception, what is, in his philosophy, fundamental. Accentuating the value of doubt, Merleau-Ponty writes:

At the moment when I am thinking or considering an idea, I am not divided into instants of my life. But it is also incontestable that this domination of time, which is the work of thought, is always somewhat
deceiving. Can I seriously say that I will always hold the ideas I do at present—and mean it? Do I not know that in six months, in a year, even if I use more or less the same formulas to express my thoughts, they will have changed their meaning slightly? Do I not know that is a life of ideas, as there is a meaning of everything I experience, and that one of my most convincing thoughts will need additions and then will be, not destroyed, but at least integrated into a new unity. This is the only conception for knowledge that is scientific and not mythological (Moran, *Phenomenology* 442).71

Merleau-Ponty, besides endorsing philosophical doubt, is echoing Borges’s Heraclitean approach to subjectivity and time.

**Skepticism, Doubt, and Wonder**

Doubt is clearly a seminal tool in thinking, including doubt of thinking itself and doubt in the form of questioning the limitations of a question or an answer. Discursive thought can create (beyond its function as a necessary and useful tool) an abstracted belief system that is every bit as misleading as a fundamentalist religious belief system. Even logic has limitations, although it remains a necessary rudder for navigating the waters of knowledge. In the years between the publication of his *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus* and the posthumously published collection *Philosophische Untersuchungen (Philosophical Investigations)*, Ludwig Wittgenstein’s writings about language and logic continued to evolve. As Gordon C.F. Bearn points out, this period between *Tractatus* and *Investigations* was a turn around for Wittgenstein, threatening the “the very idea of logic itself” (81). While
Wittgenstein initially proposed, in almost mystical terms via *Tractatus*, that understanding the logic of language would calm human unrest, subsequent years of reflection undermined, at least to some degree, that argument: “Coming face to face with the dumb fact that some things do and some things do not make sense can incite the feeling that one is in Wittgenstein’s words: ‘walking on a mountain of wonders’” (Bearn 81). This is not to say that Wittgenstein did always take into account wonder in the midst of his philosophical examinations, including the “early” Wittgenstein of *Tractatus*. In fact, it is *Tractatus* that is sometimes described as Wittgenstein’s mystical work (Bearn 126). Writing in 1916 before the publication of *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein declares, “Aesthetic wonder [Das künstleriche Wunder] is: that the world exists. That what exists does exist” (Notebooks 86). And, “a few years later, in the *Tractatus*, this wonder is no longer specifically associated with art, and is renamed the mystical (Bearn 126): ‘Not how the word is, is the mystical, but that it is’” (*Tractatus* 5.552).

A summary statement, and an indication of Wittgenstein’s genius, might be simply to say that Wittgenstein was amazed that the world exists; he felt wonder in the face of the world’s existence. This is not so different from another acclaimed modern philosopher, Martin Heidegger, who, in his discussion of Hölderlin and the underlying meaning of festivals or holidays, speaks of wonder: “On the authentic holiday, says Heidegger, we ‘step into the …intimation of the wonder (Wunder) that around us a world worlds at all, that there is something rather than nothing, that there are things and we ourselves are’” (Young, *Heidegger’s Philosophy of Art*, 86). That a world “worlds” as a verb, or that existence occurs at all, generates a certain species of
wonder that occurs perhaps more frequently with philosophers, or with the philosopher in every man and woman. This is a kind of unknowing in that what one presumed was known or knowable becomes undone or disassembled.

While doubting or questioning what one perceives or thinks can lead to a kind of intellectual paralysis, it is also essential to challenge oneself continually, as did Plato, Kant, Husserl, and Wittgenstein. The first step to challenging presuppositional bias is to acknowledge the influence of wonder, a phenomenon that paradoxically allows and in fact demands an initial subjective participatory activity with its accompanying self-forgetting and not-knowing experience.

**Humor and Playfulness**

Also analogous to wonder is humor or playfulness, a topic that is more relevant than one might expect at first glance. Humor and playfulness are characteristics of a certain kind of wonder associated with delight that frequently surfaces in art. Varo and Borges both inserted humor into their art, wrapping their playful fabulist narratives in a setting that allowed a seamless reciprocal amalgamation of wonder and humor. In the preface to his *Order of Things*, Michel Foucault credits a passage from Borges for its expression of humor in the midst of its simultaneous disruption of “known” parameters and the subsequent presuppositions a reader may bring to the usual orientation of literature:

This book first arose out of a passage in Borges, out of the laughter that shattered, as I read the passage, all the familiar landmarks of my thought—*our* thought, the thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography—breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes
with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things, and, continuing long afterwards to disturb and threaten with collapse our age-old distinction between the Same and the Other (xv).  

Borges’s humor is, as René de Costa emphasizes, “important precisely because it is embedded in deliberately weighty subjects” (15). Nor does one need to search far to find a conjunction of humor and wonder among Varo’s paintings, as in,

Fig. 8. Remedios Varo. *Vegetarian Vampires (Vampiros vegetarianos)*, 1962. Oil on canvas, 84 x 60 cm., Coleccion, GMG.
for example, her 1962 *Vegetarian Vampires* (fig 8), where her playfulness is instantly evident.

A sense of strangeness like the one that enriches Varo’s paintings can itself generate wonder. While wonder in the sense of astonishment or strangeness is only one element in the creative process, and not an end in itself, strangeness might be seen as a trace of wonder and mystery expressed in the aesthetic object. Mikel Dufrenne writes:

Strangeness expresses not so much a lacuna within our knowledge as a positive attribute of the object, which would be falsified were it to be eliminated. Nor can the strange be explained by the hidden, since the aesthetic object hides nothing. The meaning of the work is entirely present, and any mystery it may contain is fully illuminated” (410).

One could describe some of Remedios Varo’s paintings as simultaneously strange and illuminated. There is also a revelatory quality in many of her works—revelatory yet meaningful, as in her *Revelation or The Clockmaker* (Fig 9).

Commenting on this painting, Varo speaks about time, revelation and astonishment:

This painting is about time. That’s why there is a clockmaker (who, in a sense, represents our ordinary time), but through the window comes a “revelation” and all of the sudden the clockmaker comprehends a whole lot of things. I have tried to make him look both astonished and enlightened. He is surrounded by a series of timepieces all showing the same time, but containing a figure from very distinct epochs. I achieve
the effect through different period costumes. Each clock has a window with bars, like in a prison (Ovalle 111).76

Fig. 9. Remedios Varo. Revelation or the Clockmaker (Revelación o El relojero), 1955. Oil on Masonite, 27 7/8 x 33 in. Private Collection.

It should be noted here, although it is obvious, that the explication of meaning in Varo’s metaphorically and symbolically rich paintings can almost always go down any of several interpretative paths, depending on the elements or features being accentuated by a given writer. For instance, Tere Arcq interprets Revelation or The Clockmaker in terms of the writings of P.D. Ouspensky’s writings about fellow Russian G.I. Gurdjieff’s mystical theories that interested Varo, who kept a large
library of esoteric writings. In regards to the revelation the clockmaker encounters, Arcq writes, “This revelation enters in the form of several concentric circles. What might they symbolize? What is the revelation?” (77-78). Arcq interprets the circles as actually being one “closed curve” based on a concept of the fourth dimension, and that this closed curve passes into eternity, which could be described as infinite in time.

Janet Kaplan, on the other hand, discusses the same painting in more scientific terms. Noting that Varo, while not completely trusting science, “looked for a science open to a multiplicity of possibilities, one that would greet with wonder [my emphasis], and some humility, the potential of the unknown” (174). Kaplan goes on to say that in Revelation or The Clockmaker, “The vision that has caught the clockmaker by surprise and sent his spare parts crashing to the floor represents the Einsteinian revelation that time is relative” (174-175).

Concluding her assessment of the painting, Kaplan writes, “Rather than deriding the myopia or arrogance or folly of scientific rigidity, Varo here celebrates science at its best, as a creative discipline open to the Marvelous” (175).

Speaking to how the specific character of “Schopenhauer’s philosophical wonder forms an illuminating category through which to calibrate the way we read his philosophy” (Vasalou, Schopenhauer 3), Sophia Vasalou argues that “Schopenhauer’s own analysis of the sublime” combines with “a therapeutic of wonder at its heart—a therapeutic of the passions that is simultaneously a therapeutic of the subjectivity that underpins them” (5).

Scholars have noted that Husserl felt subjectivity’s first person point of view
as being “ineliminable from the very concept of knowledge” and that what he called “functioning subjectivity” is an anonymous pre-egoic form of subjectivity which is responsible for the givenness of the world and its ‘always already there’ character” (Moran and Cohen 311-312).

As will be seen in the next chapter on the numinous, there is a strong connection between wonder and the numinous. One might say that the two are inseparable in some ways. Wonder is the disruption or rupture in consciousness that allows an awareness of the numinous, and wonder also becomes the hinge that allows the gate of the numinous to swing open.

Again, it is Bataille’s writings that so vividly and with great integrity communicates his subjective experience of wonder and the numinous. Bataille’s commitment to expressing the layered complexity of such an experience justifies quoting him at length:

At the moment of nightfall, when silence invades an increasingly pure sky, I found myself alone, sitting on a narrow white veranda, not seeing anything of where I was but the roof of a house, the foliage of a tree and the sky. Before getting up to go to bed, I felt the extent to which the sweetness of things had penetrated me. I had just had the desire for a violent movement of the spirit and, in this sense, I perceived that the felicitous state into which I had fallen did not differ entirely from “mystical” states. At the very least, as I passed quickly from inattention to surprise, I felt this state with more intensity than one normally does and as if an other and not me had experienced it. I
could not deny that, with the exception of attention, which was lacking only at first, this banal felicity was an authentic inner experience, obvious distinct from project, from discourse. I thought that the “sweetness of the sky” communicated itself to me and I could feel precisely the state within that responded to it. I felt it to be present inside my head like a vaporous streaming, subtly graspable, but participating in the sweetness of the outside, putting me in possession of it, making me take pleasure in it (Inner Experience 113-114).  

This passage comes from “Ecstasy,” a section of Bataille’s Inner Experience, and he goes on for some 17 additional pages to write about his subjective rendering of such experiences. When an artist-philosopher goes to that extreme to question and excavate the significance of his or her experience of the numinous, the philosophical component outshines the artistic one. And yet even in a nonfictional essay, the artist-philosopher is very likely to present his or her thoughts in a highly creative rather than analytical manner. As Bataille emphasizes above, the inner experience, however seemingly banal, is distinct “from discourse.” He demonstrates how one can write philosophically about a topic that is seeming impervious to philosophical discourse. 

In his introduction to Bataille’s On Nietzsche, contemporary scholar Sylvére Lotringer vividly describes Bataille’s orientation: “Georges Bataille wasn’t a “regular” philosopher like Hegel or Sartre. He was diffident of concepts, resilient to systems and deeply suspicious of language. Bataille never developed ideas that he didn’t back up with his life” (1).
This last point is especially relevant to how thinkers often approach philosophical topics—not as a subjective experience, but as a conceptual theory. An unusual attribute of the artist-philosopher is that he or she can break free or return to the discursive mind at will by shifting into or shifting out of artistic expression. Art does not suffer the same impediments as discursive thought. While discursive thought admittedly can be a very valuable and finely honed tool capable of cutting through superficialities and irrelevant peripheral issues, it also can create mental manacles that inhibit and even disallow intellectual and spiritual freedom.
Chapter Three—The Numinous

The central topic here is the necessary definition and explication of usages of the numinous. Again, the governing intention of this investigation is to construct a philosophico-phenomenological exploration of wonder and image consciousness, which subsequently leads to a consideration of the numinous in regards to consciousness and art, particularly in regards to the art of Varo and Borges, but in modern art in general as well.78

As stated earlier, the primary thematic purpose of this study is not theological. Nonetheless, since the word numinous arises most often in religious studies, a temporary excursion into some of the contextual territories of the term’s use becomes necessary. Inquiring into the definition and usage of the numinous requires especially a familiarity with the theological-philosophical rendering Rudolf Otto applied to the word numinous, as well as an understanding of how his orientation differs from the usage here.

Usage and Definition of the Numinous

Why use “numinous” instead of a more familiar word? One reason is that synonyms or related words such as spiritual, religious, holy, divine, sacred, or mystical are connotatively overloaded alternatives, although at times it will be necessary to resource works that use one or more of these more familiar terms.80 Another reason is that Otto’s study of the numinous as well as subsequent usages of that term by other theologians, philosophers, artists, and writers represent the means to explicate the topic, one that that can be reconfigured and refined for the purposes
of the present thesis. Finally, the word numinous works well here in that, more than some of its synonyms, the numinous readily combines a spiritual and aesthetic interpretation.\textsuperscript{81} That combined usage is signaled by the definitions of numinous in the \textit{Oxford English Dictionary}, which include: “revealing or indicating the presence of a divinity; divine, spiritual,” and “in extended use: giving rise to a sense of the spiritually transcendent; \textit{(esp. of things in art} [emphasis mine] or the natural world) evoking a heightened sense of the mystical or sublime; awe-inspiring” (“numinous”).

Numinous has been used to describe the spiritual impulse in contemporary art (Yoon), as well as, in a more scientifically oriented evolutionary vein, explicated as a prehistoric developmental topic (Oubre\textsuperscript{\textperiodcentered}). Likewise numinous was chosen over other terms such as immanent or transcendental, although both of these terms may be used at times in this investigation to explicate specific points. While “immanent” is sometimes used in a religious or theological context, often a Christian context, to indicate “Indwelling, inherent; actually present or abiding \textit{in}; remaining within” (“immanent”), it is also widely used in philosophical contexts.\textsuperscript{82} “Transcendental” is a more complex term in the sense that the word has been used extensively throughout the histories of both philosophy and religion, from Aristotle, as “transcending or extending beyond the bounds of any single category” (“transcendental”), to Kant’s transcendental idealism: what is a priori or “not derived from experience, but concerned with the presuppositions of experience” (“transcendental”; “transcendentalism”) to the “religio-philosophical teaching of the New England school of thought represented by Emerson and others” (“transcendentalism”) to Transcendental Meditation.\textsuperscript{83}
As repeatedly stated, Edmund Husserl called his work transcendental phenomenology, but even his uses of “transcendental” were also varied and inconsistent, as was noted in Chapter One.

Other words, phrases, and concepts like “epiphany” and “the sublime” and “ecstasy” are relevant to this study. In particular, “the sublime” has an extensive use in the history of aesthetics and philosophy, and is integral to some of the thematic implications in this chapter. Thus the sublime must be addressed in some detail in this study, especially in relation to Schopenhauer’s aesthetic, but more immediately as it is contrasted with the numinous. While the meanings of “the sublime” are at times very close in meaning to “the numinous,” and each term overflows at times into the other, the two terms are nonetheless distinct, and that distinction should be clarified in this chapter so that both terms can be correctly and consistently applied. Neither term is definable in a immaculately lucid way, but a general understanding of distinctions is possible.84

**Rudolf Otto and The Numinous**

“Numinous” was first used extensively in Lutheran theologian Rudolf Otto’s 1917 *Das Heilige*, translated in 1923 into English as The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational. In describing why he chooses the word “numinous” to discuss the holy, Otto writes that he adopted the term from the Latin *numen*:

*Omen* has given us 'ominous', and there is no reason why from *numen* we should not similarly form a word 'numinous'. I shall speak, then, of a unique 'numinous' category of value and of a
Definition of a 'numinous' state of mind, which is always found wherever the category is applied. This mental state is perfectly *sui generis* and irreducible to any other; and therefore, like every absolutely primary and elementary datum, while it admits of being discussed, it cannot be strictly defined (6-7).

The detailed examination of the numinous in *Das Heilige* serves, up to a point, the clarification of how the numinous is used in this dissertation. Although Otto’s perspective is rooted in a specifically German Lutheran theological orientation, he grew dissatisfied with organized religion’s tendency to remain myopic, provincial and insular. Part of this dissatisfaction was undoubtedly stimulated by his global travels. His initial trips to England, France, and Italy were useful, but as noted by John Harvey:

> The long sojourn in the East in 1910-11 must have meant much more to him. He visited North Africa, Egypt and Palestine, India, China, and Japan, returning in due time by way of the United States. In this and in later visits to the Near East and India (1925, 1927-8), he not only deepened an already profound study of the great religions of the East but was able to realize at first hand what in the religious experience which they enshrine is specific and unique and what on the other hand is common to all genuine religions, however diversely expressed in sacred writings, ritual, or art (ix-x).
Thus Otto developed an expanded focus more oriented to the great world-religions (ix-x). The numinous is the primary topic of *Das Heilige*, and for Otto the numinous is necessarily non-rational and has two characteristics, a sense of creatureliness and a sense of tremendous mystery. Regarding the former, Otto references 19th Century German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher’s commentary about a “feeling of dependence.” There are distinctions between the theories of Otto and Schleiermacher:

Schleiermacher’s ‘feeling of absolute dependence’, it may be noted at this point, does not correspond to what are sometimes considered to be the typically ‘religious’ emotions of awe and wonder in face of the ‘numinous’, to use the famous terminology of Rudolf Otto (1869–1937). Like Schleiermacher, Otto sought to identify a specifically religious element in human experience, and located it in the sense of the mystery which is both fearful and attractive, the *mysterium*.
tremendens et fascinans. Such a ‘numinous’ encounter comes as a strange irruption into the world of normal experience (Clements 38).

Otto, however, differs from Schleiermacher. Otto describes the numinous as “something other than, merely a feeling of dependence” (9). He revises Schleiermacher’s feeling of dependence:

Desiring to give it a name of its own, I propose to call it 'creature-consciousness' or creature-feeling. It is the emotion of a creature, submerged and overwhelmed by its own nothingness in contrast to that which is supreme above all creatures (9-10).

While bracketing out Otto’s religious belief reference above to “that which is supreme above all creatures,” it is still relevant to note that his reference is very much about a feeling sensibility to something more than the conventional notion of self-referencing. This reference to a feeling sensibility becomes more relevant as this chapter develops.85

The second characteristic of the numinous, its tremendous mystery, or as Otto calls it, mysterium tremendum, to which he subsequently adds the element of fascination, or fascinans, is more directly relevant to a philosophico-phenomenological understanding and use of numinous. Otto describes this mystery as a presence that can be profane or divine, demonic or purely glorious and ecstatic (12-13). But the point here is that it is a mysterious presence available spontaneously through a feeling sensibility. Analyzing mysterium tremendum as a plurality, one Otto also refers to at times as “states of mind,” he first considers the details of three states of minds that he describes as aspects of tremendum. These include “awfulness,” an
overpoweringness or *majestas*, and energy and urgency, or *orge* and *urgos*. By awfulness, Otto refers to a form of dread, a species of mystical awe. He especially draws on Judaic-Christian scriptural references. While discussing the nuances of *majestas*, which he relates to creature-consciousness and Schleiermacher’s original “feeling of dependence” on something greater than the creature, which is to say the human being, Otto considers mysticism as follows:

A characteristic common to all types of mysticism is the Identification, in different degrees of completeness, of the personal self with the transcendent Reality. This identification has a source of its own, with which we are not here concerned, and springs from 'moments' of religious experience which would require separate treatment. 'Identification' alone, however, is not enough for mysticism; it must be Identification with the Something that is at once absolutely supreme in power and reality and wholly non-rational. And it is among the mystics that we most encounter this element of religious consciousness (22).

Otto also references a description, originally collected by William James, of a mystically oriented incident of religious sensibility recalled by a clergyman:

It is impossible fully to describe the experience. It was like the effect of some great orchestra when all the separate notes have melted into one swelling harmony that leaves the listener conscious of nothing save that his soul is being wafted upwards, and almost bursting with its own emotion. The perfect stillness of the night was thrilled by a more
solemn silence. The darkness held a presence that was all the more felt because it was not seen. I could not any more have doubted that He was there than that I was. Indeed, I felt myself to be, if possible, the less real of the two (James 56).

While there may be hundreds, if not many more, descriptions of sensibility to the numinous, the countless varieties of such epiphanic experiences challenge, in their multifarious details, the task of framing the consciousness of a sensibility to the numinous. Given the specific topic at hand of relating the numinous to image consciousness, that task becomes more possible and more clearly defined when applying the theories and experiences of working artists in the chapters ahead.

To continue with Das Heilige, Otto also explicates the third part of tremendum, the element he describes as energy or urgency, and how it is associated with the numinous. Describing this energy as vitality, passion, emotional temper, will, force, movement, excitement, activity, and impetus, he states that all of these forms of energy or urgency reflect “a genuine aspect of the divine nature—its non-rational aspect—a due consciousness of which served to protect religion itself from being ‘rationalized’ away” (23). Otto also for the first time mentions the work of Schopenhauer, whose 19th century anti-religious sentiments and commentaries were well known to philosophers, theologians, and artists of the 20th century.

The element of 'energy' reappears in Fichte's speculations on the Absolute as the gigantic, never-resting, active world stress, and in Schopenhauer’s daemonic 'Will'. At the same time both these writers are guilty of the same error that is already found in myth; they transfer
'natural' attributes, which ought only to be used as 'ideograms' for what is itself properly beyond utterance, to the non-rational as real qualifications of it, and they mistake symbolic expressions of feelings for adequate concepts upon which a 'scientific' structure of knowledge may be based (24).

This quote is also referenced to foreshadow a common misunderstanding of Schopenhauer, whose aesthetic will assume ahead a pronounced and integral function within this study. Otto is presuming (perhaps because of what he perceives to be Schopenhauer’s atheism) that Schopenhauer cannot access or even directly experience the non-rational aspect of the numinous except through symbolic expressions of feelings. This is simply not the case in Schopenhauer’s philosophy of art, which is, as we shall see, very much about a direct non-rational experience of self-transcendence, albeit in his mind not a religious experience (World as Will, Vol. 1, 167-267; Vol. 11, 406-447).

Otto goes on to assert that the two aspects of the mysterium tremendum can function together as a reciprocally overflowing dynamic, or singularly as tremendum or mysterium. The three functional elements of the tremendum—awfulness, overpoweringness, energy or urgency—altogether serve a qualitatively descriptive function of what is tremendous about the numinous, but Otto does note (25-26) that the meaning of mysteriousness is different from the adjective tremendous, and that the levels of meanings germane to mysterium are also different:

Taken, indeed, in its purely natural sense, mysterium would first mean merely a secret or a mystery in the sense of that which is alien to us,
uncomprehended and unexplained; and so far *mysterium* is itself merely an ideogram, an analogical notion taken from the natural sphere, illustrating, but incapable of exhaustively rendering, our real meaning. Taken in the religious sense, that which is 'mysterious' is—to give it perhaps the most striking expression—the 'wholly other' (*ganz anders*), that which is quite beyond the sphere of the usual, the intelligible, and the familiar, which therefore falls quite outside the limits of the 'canny', and is contrasted with it, filling the mind with blank wonder and astonishment (26).

What exactly is Otto asserting about the mysterious? Is it an invisible presence forever unknown but just sensed, a state of consciousness forever out of reach of human rationality? Or is it a temporary mystery that can eventually be solved by the logic, neuroscience, and other scientific evidence? Otto tries to address some questions, stating that the mysterious is not simply something that could be called a “problem” because it temporarily eludes understanding: “The truly 'mysterious' object is beyond our apprehension and comprehension, not only because our knowledge has certain irremovable limits, but because in it we come upon something inherently 'wholly other', whose kind and character are incommensurable with our own, and before which we therefore recoil in a wonder that strikes us chill and numb” (28). Again, Otto’s “wholly other” denotes a religious deity or presence that is common with dualistic religious concepts. More esoteric spiritual orientations, ones that propose a nondualistic spirituality, assert an ontological or cosmological unity, a form of what is ultimately non-dual consciousness.
The most important question that needs to be addressed here and throughout the present study is one that falls outside of Otto’s theological parameters, which, as he continues into a consideration of the element of fascination, or *fascinans*, reflects a degree of westernized misunderstanding of some primordial forms of the numinous and sensibility to the numinous that are too exclusively Christian to be of thematic use here. Otto’s somewhat intolerant views of meditation and shamanistic ritual are demonized in his theology (31-39) within the consideration of *fascinans* so that any degree of philosophical objectivity established earlier is undermined. In the interest of staying on track with the present study, one must simply ask how is the numinous aligned with a sensibility to that presence within the context of art and aesthetics? Otto does briefly discuss art and the numinous, but I propose here to preface his discussion of art with a clarifying interjection.

**The Numinous and a Sensibility to the Numinous**

Since the extended force of conviction inherent in Otto’s Lutheran Protestantism can be overwhelming, as in (despite his radical reformative tone) a scholarly sermon, it is useful here to make a navigational adjustment, so to speak, between Otto’s gusts of principles about the numinous and the more steady numinous headwind of this specific dissertation. The distinctions and contrasts between Otto’s religiously oriented numinous and the use of the numinous in the aesthetic context of this study will become clearer ahead, but meanwhile there are a few points that merit immediate clarification, whether in concurrent or dissimilar terms. First, it is correct to assert that the usage of numinous in Otto’s study and in this investigation are both “non-rational” and, in some sense, not accessible via discursive thought alone.
However, unlike Otto, this study is not explicating recognition and worship of what religion and theologians often refers to as “Divine Presence.” Adding personal religious belief and judgment to an issue creates a sense of exclusivity around a topic, one that diminishes the effectiveness of any scholarly explication of philosophical and phenomenological topics. Indeed, one reason Husserl’s epoché is invaluable is because it suspends personal belief and opinion or any kind of preconceived and fixed subjectivity that might undermine phenomenological investigation. Husserl appears to have kept his personal religious life out of his phenomenological investigations, at least for the most part, although he did have a genuine interest in spirituality (Bello, *Divine in Husserl*, 65-79), and there is evidence of his “religious search” (Bello, “Archeology,” 5-7). His conversion from Judaism to Christianity, something not uncommon among Jewish professionals working in the larger context of Europe, especially Germany, where anti-Semitic prejudices might negatively influence a career, is not as important here as Husserl’s direct communications with Otto, which will be considered in more detail shortly.

**Husserl and Otto**

The respective investigations of Edmund Husserl and Rudolf Otto are important to this study. Thus any connection between the two scholars needs to be examined. Otto initially taught at Göttingen, where he was a colleague of Husserl (Cox 55). To some extent, both Husserl and Otto (especially Husserl) were working within the stream of modern phenomenology:

Although phenomenology had already existed for almost two decades as a fairly esoteric form of academic philosophy, after the war it
received increasing public attention, and came to be regarded by some as a means for restoring European culture. Among those to have regarded *Das Heilige* as a contribution to phenomenology were two of the movement’s leading representatives, Husserl and [Max] Scheler. Husserl had been professor of philosophy at Göttingen around the turn of the century, when Otto was also there, and the two appear to have been personally acquainted (Gooch 160-161).

In 1919, Husserl read *Das Heilige* and wrote to Otto, saying, despite methodological reservations, he regarded the book as ‘*ein erster Anfang für eine Phänomenologie des Religiösen*’ [A beginning for a phenomenology of religion.]” (Dahl, *Phenomenology* 18). The details of the actual letter are far more telling, however, in that it discloses much about Husserl’s thoughts about *Das Heilige* and also about phenomenology’s relationship to both religion and metaphysics in general. As in most of his writings, Husserl is passionate about protecting the purity of his transcendental phenomenology. Since it offers a sustained and intimate encounter with both Husserl and Otto’s work, an excerpt of the final page of Husserl’s letter is quoted in full here:

> Through Heidegger and Oxner [sic] (I no longer know who took precedence in the matter) I became aware last summer of your book, *Das Heilige [The Idea of the Holy]*, and it has had a strong effect on me as hardly no [sic] other book in years. Allow me to express my impressions in this way: It is a first beginning for a phenomenology of religion, at least with regard to everything that does not go beyond a
pure description and analysis of the phenomena themselves. To put it succinctly: I cannot share in the additional philosophical theorizing; and it is quite non-essential for the specific task and particular subject matter of this book, and it would be better left out. It seems to me that a great deal more progress would have to be made in the study of the phenomena and their eidetic analysis before a theory of religious consciousness, as a philosophical theory, could arise. Above all, one would need to carry out a radical distinction: between accidental factum and the eidos. One would need to study the eidetic necessities and eidetic possibilities of religious consciousness and its correlate. One would need a systematic eidetic typification of the levels of religious data, indeed in their eidetically necessary development. It seems to me that the metaphysician (theologian) in Herr Otto has carried away on his wings Otto the phenomenologist; and in that regard I think of the image of the angels who cover their eyes with their wings. But be that as it may, this book will hold an abiding place in the history of genuine philosophy of religion or phenomenology of religion. It is a beginning and its significance is that it goes back to the “beginnings,” the “origins,” and thus, in the most beautiful sense of the word, is “original.” And our age yearns for nothing so much as that the true origins might finally come to word and then, in the higher sense, come to their Word, to the Logos.
I am sure that you will not take amiss this free expression of mine. From our Göttingen years you know how highly I esteem you and with what pleasure seek out intellectual contact with you. Now that you have brought us phenomenologists worthwhile gifts, we would be very happy if new ones were to follow these. With cordial greetings and constant esteem, F. Husserl (“Letter” 25).  

The connections between Husserl and Otto are relevant, especially when one considers that “Otto begins by employing a kind of epochē to cordon off a number of prejudices which obstruct the pure access to the phenomenon” (Dahl, *In Between*, 27). What are the prejudices Otto brackets out? He first challenges the notion that the holy at its most fundamental root, which is to say the numinous, can be conceptually understood or identified. Nor can conceptual thinking call forth the numinous (27-28), since, Otto asserts, the nature of the numinous is completely non-rational.  

**Otto and Art**

When Otto states, “In the arts nearly everywhere the most effective means of representing the numinous is 'the sublime',” (65) his assessment of the role of art does coincide with the present investigation, although his religious motives for recognizing this are different from the thematic direction intended here. Somehow, the beauty and sublime nature of art brings Otto’s tolerance and open-mindedness to the surface, which is in itself a testimony to the power of art:

The art of China, Japan, and Tibet, whose specific character has been determined by Taoism and Buddhism, surpasses all others in the unusual richness and depth of such impressions of
the 'magical', and even an inexpert observer responds to them readily. The designation 'magical' is here correct even from the historical point of view, since the origin of this language of form was properly magical representations, emblems, formularies, and contrivances. But the actual impression of 'magic' is quite independent of this historical bond of connexion with magical practices. It occurs even when nothing is known of the latter; nay, in that case it comes out most strongly and unbrokenly. Beyond dispute art has here a means of creating a unique impression--that of the magical--apart from and independent of reflection. Now the magical is nothing but a suppressed and dimmed form of the numinous, a crude form of it which great art purifies and ennobles. In great art the point is reached at which we may no longer speak of the 'magical', but rather are confronted with the numinous itself, with all its impelling motive power, transcending reason, expressed in sweeping lines and rhythm. In no art, perhaps, is this more fully realized than in the great landscape painting and religious painting of China in the classical period of the T'ang and Sung dynasties (66-67).
Otto’s assertion that great art can be a vehicle of the numinous itself, signals an aspect of this thesis, although this thesis does specifically explore how a sensibility to the numinous is related to the art of Varo and Borges. The Chinese landscape painting Otto admires could be described as expressing a distillation of perceptual
reality, a moment of seeing, as well as an instance of *mysterium tremendum* and perhaps in some version an experience of the sublime.

**The Sublime**

In Chapter VIII of *Das Heilige*, Otto considers how the *mysterium tremendum* element of the numinous is related to “analogies and associated feelings” (41-49). An essential task is to consider how the numinous is the same or distinct from the aesthetic concept of the sublime. Describing contrasting elements in *mysterium tremendum* requires Otto to reference the sublime:

> No attempt of ours to describe this harmony of contrasts in the import of the mysterium can really succeed; but it may perhaps be adumbrated, as it were from a distance, by taking an analogy from a region belonging not to religion but to aesthetics. In the category and feeling of the sublime we have a counterpart to it, though it is true it is but a pale reflexion, and moreover involves difficulties of analysis all its own. The analogies between the consciousness of the sublime and of the numinous may be easily grasped.1 To begin with, 'the sublime', like 'the numinous', is in Kantian language an idea or concept 'that cannot be unfolded' or explicated (*unauswickelbar*). Certainly we can tabulate some general 'rational' signs that uniformly recur as soon as we call an object sublime; as, for instance, that it must approach, or threaten to overpass, the bounds of our understanding by some 'dynamic' or 'mathematic' greatness, by potent manifestations of force or magnitude in spatial extent. But these are obviously only conditions...
of, not the essence of, the impression of sublimity. A thing does not become sublime merely by being great. The concept itself remains unexplicated; it has in it something mysterious, and in this it is like that of the numinous. A second point of resemblance is that the sublime exhibits the same peculiar dual character as the numinous; it is at once daunting, and yet again singularly attracting, in its impress upon the mind. It humbles and at the same time exalts us, circumscribes and extends us beyond ourselves, on the one hand releasing in us a feeling analogous to fear, and on the other rejoicing us. So the idea of the sublime is closely similar to that of the numinous, and is well adapted to excite it and to be excited by it, while each tends to pass over into the other (41-42).

That a religious purity—or “high” versus “low” conceit around authenticity—exists in Otto’s account has been noted by critics and scholars (Harten 76), but before contrasting the numinous and the sublime we should ask: what is the sublime? The long history of the aesthetic concept of the sublime began with the Greek figure Longinus, who may have lived in the 1st century AD and wrote On the Sublime, a critical treatise about writing style, which began to be translated in the 10th century but did not evolve into the powerful aesthetic concept we know as the sublime until the 18th century with Edmund Burke’s A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful (1757) and Immanuel Kant’s seminal texts: Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime (Beobachtungen über das Gefühl des Schönen und Erhabenen) (1764) and The Critique of Judgment (Kritik der
Urteilskraft) (1790). Kant, described as “the great theorist of the sublime” (Kirwan 159), would tremendously influence, in one direction or another, the majority of art theorists, aestheticians, and philosophers of art who followed. Kant’s aesthetic, and especially his explication of the sublime, “has grown exponentially in recent years” (Pillow 1). As has already been noted in this study, Kant’s overall aesthetic theory did influence to some degree the philosophies of Husserl and Otto, and as we shall see, Kant greatly influenced Schopenhauer’s aesthetic.93

Asking what the sublime is might be compared to picking up a palm-size stone in a field and slowly turning it over while closely inspecting each aspect of the stone that comes into the viewer’s perceptual field of vision. Each angle offers a new perspective with its own details. This analogy works thematically here because the interpretations and explications of the sublime are multifarious in meaning and usage. Sublimis, or sub and limen, the Latin roots of sublime, combine “up to” (sub) with “lintel” or the top section of a door (limen). The Oxford English Dictionary’s ten definitions and numerous secondary definitions of sublime indicate the variety of uses of the word (“sublime”). Nonetheless, the first definition, “Set or raised aloft” (“sublime”), signals a primary starting point in the use of the sublime, one that Philip Shaw emphasizes “also describes a state of mind,” and he uses as an example the sense of awe or high emotion one feels when encountering a cathedral’s “cavernous interior” or the dying words of King Lear (1).

One interesting point emphasized by James Kirwan is how 18th century writers not only broke with Longinus’ examples of the sublime in writing, but also used the words and examples of other writers. As noted by Kirwan, “Burke illustrates
the material sublime with quotations from the classics; Kant, the great theorist of the sublime, exemplifies it with the effect of the Pyramids and St. Peter’s, which he had never seen; Radcliffe, the great novelist of the sublime, describes a landscape she had not visited; Whitman, singing the song of himself, dredges up every cliché of the genre” (159). Thus one might say that a magnified type of intertextuality, one that is emphatically employed almost to the point of appropriation, exists with 18th century writing about the sublime.

Intertextual interpretations represent only one aspect of studying the sublime. A major characteristic often emphasized is terror.

**Burke, Kant, and Schiller on the Sublime**

Besides Longinus, the writings of Edmund Burke, Immanuel Kant, and Friedrich Schiller were primary influences on subsequent interpretations of the sublime. In a section titled “Mapping the Contemporary Sublime” (Morley 19-21) in the anthology writings about the sublime he edited, Simon Morley points to these four figures as precursors of the present day orientations to the sublime, although each emphasized his own orientation to an experience or a version of encountering reality (19). 94

How did the evolution of the sublime evolve after Longinus? Paul Guyer notes that the title of Kant’s 1764 *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* was influenced by Burke’s 1757 *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, especially by including “feeling” in the title, “although Kant does not provide an extensive psychological and physiological analysis of these feelings, as Burke did, but is instead primarily concerned with
differences in the capacities for these feelings between the two sexes and diverse cultures and nations” (xv). There are several differences between the two thinkers’ approaches to the sublime. First, Kant seems to question, in his 1790 *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, whether Burke’s enquiry is even actually philosophical: “To make psychological observations (as Burke does in his book on the beautiful and the sublime), and thus to gather material for rules of experience that will be systematically connected in the future, without yet seeking to comprehend them, is certainly the only true obligation of empirical psychology, which only with difficulty could ever lay claim to the rank of a philosophical science” (38). In other words, Kant asserts that “it would be absurd” (39) to explain a judgment in psychological terms. Later, when Kant compares his “transcendental exposition of aesthetic judgments” to “the physiological exposition, as it has been elaborated by a [sic] Burke and many acute men among us, in order to see whither a merely empirical exposition of the sublime and beautiful would lead,” and then directly describes Burke by name as someone who is “the foremost author of this sort of approach” (158), he is essentially drawing a line between Burke’s empirical methodology and his own transcendental aesthetic rendering of the sublime.

In considering poet and dramatist Friedrich Schiller’s contribution to the evolution of the sublime, one must remember that Schiller was born in 1759, two years after Burke’s book was published. One of the primary influences in Schiller’s life was his later friendship with Goethe. However, the fact that Schiller’s series of letters, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man (Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen in einer Reihe von Briefen)*, was published in 1794, during the years that
Schiller and Goethe began a lifelong friendship, does not mean that these two artistic geniuses completely agreed about the nature of the sublime. Schiller’s letters pivoted around his disenchantment with the violence of the French Revolution, which also inspired in him the ideas expressed in his poem “The Artists” (“Die Künstler”):

In labor is the bee your master,
In skillfulness the earthworm has your teacher grown,
Your knowledge you do share with spirit minds far vaster,
’Tis {Art,} O Man, you have alone!

The land which knowledge does reside in
You reached through beauty's morning gate.
Its higher gleam to now abide in,
The mind on charms must concentrate.
What by the sound of Muses' singing
With trembling sweet did pierce you through,
A strength unto your bosom bringing
Which to the world-soul lifted you.

That Schiller’s response to the sublime as ecstatic experience (Morley 19) is most directly revealed in his poetry, points to the creative expression artists bring to the sublime, and more specifically in this study, to the numinous.

**Modern and Contemporary Uses of The Sublime**

When the 18th century sense of terror mixed with awe in the face of nature’s overpowering and threatening vastness is reseeded in the chaos of twentieth-century
violence, sublimity becomes an aesthetic abstraction, because its aesthetic significance becomes secondary to its sociopolitical implications. I say an abstraction, because the contemporary sublime is in some sense a non-object, or at least a complex version of a non-object. For example, Kristeva connects obliquely with the sublime when she designates the abject as something that is the “well-spring of sign for a non-object, on the edges of primal repression, one can understand it skirting the somatic symptom on the one hand and sublimation on the other” (11). Describing the night sky, oceanic vistas, or light coming through stained glass, Kristeva notes how “the ‘sublime’ object dissolves in the raptures of a bottomless memory” (12). She then offers one of the richest, verbally poetic renderings of the sublime ever written:

As soon as I perceive it, as soon as I name it, the sublime triggers—it has always already triggered—a spree of perceptions and words that expands memory boundlessly. I then forget the point of departure and find myself removed to a secondary universe, set off from the one where “I” am—delight and loss. Not at all short but always with and through perception and words, the sublime is a something added that expands us, overstrains us, and causes us to be here, as dejects, and there, as others and sparkling. A divergence, an impossible bounding. Everything missed, joy-fascination (12).

Besides the emphasis on psychoanalysis in her general writings, Kristeva in this excerpt signals an interpretation of the sublime that is somewhat different from the traditional definitions and even from many contemporary understandings. When she states that the sublime surfaces “always with and through perception and words,”
that is unusual. Most definitions of the sublime so frequently emphasize a nonverbal aspect to this experience that one could almost presume that the sublime could be described as that for which words are inadequate, or something words cannot express. Yet as Shaw notes (1-4) often the declaration of the failure to communicate in words what the sublime actually becomes a communication in words of the nature of the sublime; he uses, as an example, lines from Keat’s 1817 poem “On Seeing the Elgin Marbles,” in which Keats uses words like “undescribable” and “dim-conceived” to emphasize the “magnitude” of what he is encountering.

Interestingly, though not surprisingly, Kristeva, 96 creates her own definition and explication of the sublime, one that could really not be described as eighteenth-century, modernist or postmodernist, but simply Kristevian. Nonetheless, what is the significance of Kristeva’s comments? Does her description of “always with and through perception and words” point to an entirely subjective response, or is it an indication of modern and contemporary responses to the sublime in general? Shaw, in a chapter titled “The Sublime is Now: Derrida and Lyotard” (115-129), explicates the postmodernist orientation to the sublime. “The difference between Romanticism, modernism, and postmodernism can therefore be measured in their contrasting attitudes to the unpresentable” (115), stressing that rather than ideas of the divine or the humanist concept of mind, the unpresentable sublime in postmodernism remains “absolutely other” (115).

While both Lyotard and Derrida offer a rereading of Kant, Lyotard argues that the postmodernist presentation of the unpresentable is a search for a new presentation that accentuates not a form of enjoyment but of pain because the unpresentable is
impossible to see. Derrida’s deconstructive methodology, on the other hand, stresses the contrivance of any system that conceptually conditions the sublime. For Derrida, what is transcendental is never free of the empirical. Shaw points (116-117) to Derrida’s argument in *The Truth in Painting* about the Kantian *parergon*—a bordering device such as the frame of a painting, or something subordinate or embellishing—as evidence that the formlessness of the sublime eliminates the possibility of a *parergon* for the sublime. Even so, some critics suggest that Derrida does suggest that the sublime is “bounded” and thus not “wholly other or beyond,” and Shaw references (117-118) critic Mark Cheetham’s comments in *Kant, Art, and Art History: Moments of Discipline*, about Derrida’s many “seems” as leading to the possibility of a sublime that is bounded. That Cheetham’s argument ultimately yields a postmodernist interpretation of Kant’s “Analytic of the Sublime,” points to the contemporary revising of the Romantic sublime: “The pleasure that arises from the sublime consists, therefore, precisely in the setting of, rather than the overcoming of, limits, for reason, unlike imagination, can put such a border in place and take emotional pleasure from this accomplishment” (117).

“Pleasure,” however, is an inadequate description of Kristeva’s response to the sublime. Saying her encounter with the sublime is pleasurable does not match in interpretation, intensity, and depth her experience of the sublime as “a spree of perceptions and words that expands memory boundlessly” (12). Ultimately, as will be considered later, at least part of the answer may lie in Kristeva’s orientation to the “decentered subject,” a concept that adds a dimension to the sublime that also serves, in some artistic cases, as an additional means for understanding the varieties of
numinous sensibility. An immediate observation is that while a broad understanding of the sublime, especially in the 18th century was of a phenomenon that words cannot express, Kristeva’s “a spree of perceptions and words that expands memory boundlessly” is actually more aligned in some sense with Longinus’s focus on writing and rhetoric.

Lyotard, whose writings led to a 1985 Centre Pompidou exhibition on the sublime that he curated, explicates the implications of Kant’s version of the sublime in his 1991 Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime, taking the Kantian thought in a new direction. “Postmodernism, as Lyotard sees it, is not a deviation from but rather a radicalization of Kant’s original ‘Analytic’; it aims to maintain the shock of the sublime so as to prevent the ascendancy of the rational over the real” (Shaw 116).

The modern and postmodern sublime is most effectively understood directly via the art of the artist-philosopher, and his or her artmaking. In that context, both the aesthetic relevance of the sublime and its reciprocal relationship with the numinous, and vice versa, is revealed, especially in regards to the thematic explication central to this study. Non-rational aspects of the sublime and the numinous that surface while explicating topics such as sacred cultures and alternative states of consciousness can be communicated by artists in more concrete language through the experience of their own artmaking activities.

Comparing the Numinous and The Sublime

While the sublime has generally been contrasted with the beautiful, in this study it is essential that the sublime be compared to the numinous. The concepts are so close as to be synonymous at times. Thus to distinguish the distinctions between
the two requires some painstaking explication, especially since every scholar seems to
have his or her version of articulating that difference. In reality, the similarities are
what one first notices. As Otto emphasized, “the idea of the sublime is closely similar
to that of the numinous” (41-42). He notes that the numinous and the sublime are
alike in two respects—each includes “something mysterious” and each “exhibits the
same peculiar dual character” (41-42). When discussing Asian art, for example, Otto
compares the sublime and the numinous:

Besides silence and darkness oriental art knows a third direct means
for producing a strongly numinous impression, to wit, emptiness and
empty distances. Empty distance, remote vacancy, is, as it were, the
sublime in the horizontal. The wide-stretching desert, the boundless
uniformity of the steppe, have real sublimity, and even in us
Westerners they set vibrating chords of the numinous along with the
note of the sublime, according to the principle of the association of
feelings (69).

Also, for Otto, the sublime is a “means” to represent the numinous in art, and
he goes into some detail to argue for this idea:

In the arts nearly everywhere the most effective means of representing
the numinous is 'the sublime'. This is especially true of architecture, in
which it would appear to have first been realized. One can hardly
escape the idea that this feeling for expression must have begun to
awaken far back in the remote Megalithic Age. The motive underlying
the erection of those gigantic blocks of rock, hewn or unworked, single
monoliths or titanic rings of stone, as at Stonehenge, may have well been originally to localize and preserve and, as it were, to store up the numen in solid presence by magic; but the change to the motive of expression must have been from the outset far too vividly stimulated not to occur at a very early date. In fact the bare feeling for solemn and imposing magnitude and for the pomp of sublime pose and gesture is a fairly elementary one, and we cannot doubt that this stage had been reached when the mastabas, obelisks and pyramids were built in Egypt. It is indeed beyond question that the builders of these temples, and of the Sphinx of Gizeh, which set the feeling of the sublime, and together with and through it that of the numinous, throbbing in the soul almost like a mechanical reflex, must themselves have been conscious of this effect and have intended it (65-66).

One naturally wonders why Otto cannot address the numinous without referencing the sublime. It has been noted that philosopher Max Scheler, while using and in some ways extending Husserl’s phenomenological approach, also commented on Otto’s approach to the numinous: “Scheler specifically affirms Otto’s allegation that the numinous constitutes a primary datum sui generis, which, as such, is incapable of being defined and must be approached instead by means of description and comparison” (Gooch 161).99 Certainly Otto is using description and comparison in his writing about the sublime and the numinous. Scheler also suggested:

Otto’s method of successively exploring, comparing and contrasting the various layers and nuances of the experiences that he describes, in
order thereby to isolate and exhibit the numinous, “is the way that leads to the phenomenological intuition of essence (Wesensschau)” (162).

**sui generis and Wesensschau**

Thus it is useful to consider in more detail—in regards to Otto’s presentation of the numinous—two terms: *sui generis* and *Wesensschau*. The more common former is defined as “Of one's or its own kind; peculiar” ("sui generis, n." *OED Online*); the latter, *Wesensschau*, means the intuition of essences, or eidetic intuition, which can also has been described as “Husserl ‘s famous *Wesensschau*” (Levinas, *Theory of Intuition*, 105). Levinas goes farther in elucidating Husserl’s *Wesensschau*, noting, “Just like individual objects, ideal beings and essences admit of truth and falsity. Essences are not fictions about which one may say anything” (105). It is interesting that Levinas points out that Husserl, in his explication of imagination said that ideal objects cannot be divided between actually perceived and imagined objects (105), a point that is clearly relevant to the art of Borges and Varo.

In other words, sensible intuition is not eidetic intuition. The key to understanding this approach lies in the understanding (as accentuated earlier and reemphasized farther ahead) Husserlian presentation (*Vorstellung*), *gegebenheit* and Intentionality (*Intentionalität*).

It is useful here to remember that there are numerous attempts to deal with the ineffable. For example, the Kantian *noumena* refers not to experience, but to the underlying conditions of experience that are not knowable as things-in-themselves, yet which nonetheless must be presupposed in order for an experience of phenomena
to be able to “cohere” (Shaw 155). Essentially, this means that the Kantian thing-in-itself “exists independently of experience” (156). While the Kantian *noumena* is not Otto’s numinous, Otto does reference Kant at times, and in fact, while discussing how Kant separates what he means by “aesthetic” from logical judgment, Otto references Kant and then goes on to quote both Schiller and Goethe in order to illustrate Kant (148), a superb moment of intertextual gymnastics:

Kant's distinction between the 'aesthetic' and logical judgement did not mean to imply that the faculty of 'aesthetic' judgement was a judgement upon 'aesthetic' objects in the special narrow sense of the term 'aesthetic', as being concerned with the beautiful. His primary intention is simply and in general terms to separate the faculty of judgement based upon feeling of whatever sort from that of the understanding, from discursive, conceptual thought and inference; and his term 'aesthetic' is simply meant to mark as the peculiarity of the former that, in contrast to logical judgement, it is not worked out in accordance with a clear intellectual scheme, but in conformity to obscure, dim principles which must be felt and cannot be *stated* explicitly as premises. Kant employs sometimes another expression also to denote such obscure, dim principles of judgement, based on pure feeling, viz. the phrase 'not-unfolded' or 'unexplicated concepts' (*unausgewickelte Begriffe*); and his meaning is here exactly that of the poet, when he says:

*It waketh the power of feelings obscure*

*That in the heart wondrously slumbered.*

*Und wecket der dunklen Gefühle Gewalt,*
Die im Herzen wunderbar schliefen.

( Schiller: Der Graf von Habsburg.)

Or again:

What beyond our conscious knowing
Or our thought's extremest span
Threads by night the labyrinthine
Pathways of the breast of man.

Was von Menschen nicht gewußt
Oder nicht bedacht,
Durch das Labyrinth der Brust
Wandelt bei der Nacht.

(Goethe: An den Mona.)

As a literary artist who was also a thinker and scientist, Goethe presents a perspective to the numinous that is less burdened with sentimentality or romantic idealism, and more about the artist in the world. Nonetheless, Otto accessed Goethe’s writings in Das Heilige, albeit at times to contrast his orientation to the numinous with Goethe’s “pagan” orientation (153).\(^{100}\) Paul Bishop, a contemporary professor of German literature and someone who has written about C. G. Jung in a context of German literature and the numinous, describes Otto’s use of Goethe’s writings, including Faust, to describe the German use of the numinous via the term das Ungeheure. Bishop quotes “the famous scene from Part Two where Faust visits the Mothers” (Bishop 117):

Our sense of awe’s what keeps us most alive.
The world chokes human feeling more and more,
But deep dread still can move us to the core.

Das Schaudern ist der Menschheit bestes Teil.
Wie auch die Welt ihm das Gefühl verleueere,
Ergiffen fühlt er tief das Ungeheure (Bishop 117). 101

The Jungian Numinous and the Numinous in the Present Study: Distinctions and Similarities

Another area in which the sublime and the numinous appear together is when the Romantic sublime meets the Jungian numinous. Although the latter will be examined in more detail shortly, it is important to note right away that Wordsworth’s poetry is a poetry of the sublime, so that its relationship to the numinous is always near at hand. “Rather than invoke the vast library of works on Wordsworth and the sublime, for the purposes of my discussion, I propose that for Wordsworth, the sublime is an aesthetic and affective experience of the environment that becomes something numinous” (Goss 1). Goss, referencing Otto, goes on to define numinous as something beyond oneself and generally inaccessible except “in the moment of encounter with the numinous, one is afforded a momentary glimpse into, or intuition of, hidden depths in a view, image, object, sound or other sensory stimulus” (Goss 1).

The idea of the numinous as something that is hidden or invisible does not in itself distinguish the sublime from the numinous. The sublime is not always as visible as a distant volcano or the pyramids. In gothic literature as well as modern horror fiction, an invisible presence which may only be perceived via a sensibility initially conveys a kind of thrill of terror, a variety of the sublime, that pivots on the anticipatory edge of the possibility of the unseen becoming a visible, destructive
“something” that will disrupt, terrorize, or end one’s existence.

For Jung, however, the numinous represents other qualities. While Jung did appropriate Otto’s term (Main 158), he used the numinous in his work more with “healing and with the psychological process of individuation” (Stein 43) than Otto’s usage, which was defining the numinous as “a feeling of the supersensual” and thus as “the experiential basis of religions” (41). Unlike most theologians of his time, Otto stressed direct experience rather than conceptual thought about religious experience as the basis of his theory, and his “preference for feeling over thought set him apart from his theological fellows” (39).

Jung’s focus on the unconscious as a site of the numinous experience can be contrasted with Otto’s religious orientation, but there are numerous reciprocities, not least of all because of Jung’s interest in how religious symbols and ideas evoked the numinous (45). One such agreement in regards to a sensibility to the numinous is that certain artistically inclined individuals—artists and those who have an ongoing appreciation of art may have an intensified sensibility to the numinous (45).

Returning to the topic of art also reengages the primary focus and purpose of this chapter, which is to elucidate the meaning of the numinous as used here. While “numinous” has been used to describe the spiritual impulse in contemporary art, it has also been used in a more scientifically oriented evolutionary vein as a prehistoric developmental characteristic.

How are art, art-making and art-viewing related to the numinous? Is this only a “transcendent” issue? Otto frequently uses the word transcendent (transzendent) in his references to God, but to what extent is that concept a factor in the investigation
of a numinous sensibility to art and image consciousness? Jungian scholars question the role of a transcendent force. For example, Bishop, quoting from Goethe’s “Trilogy of Passion,” argues against such a force:

Thus the sense of the Numinous does not so much reveal the Divine as reside in a way of seeing things, seeing them with “the eyes of the spirit,” so that we realize the divine nature of all things. This, then, is the true sense of the Numinous in Goethe—and, by extension, in Jung as well. For him, the sets of “feelings,” “ideas,” and “events,” that Otto described as numinous, can be understood in terms of Goethe’s “eyes of the spirit” as aesthetic experiences, ones that “shape” us, “impress” us, and “leave their mark” upon us: in other worlds, they are “archetypal.” The power of the Numinous, the transformative effect of the archetypal, resides not in a breakthrough from some transcendent realm, but in a profound, even life-changing alteration in the way we view the present and our life in it. Such a de-metaphysicized, de-mystified conception of the Numinous would reveal the divine nature of life itself—divine, that is, not in terms of an external, transcendent force, but inherently, immanently, immediately. As Jung pointed out, the philological root of the Numinous lies in the notion of divinity and of respect for the religious, but can we have a conception of the divine without God? The ancient Epicurean and Stoic belief in the sanctity of the moment might provide such a model of the divine without the belief in transcendence” (Bishop 129-130).
Bishop is quoted at length because there are both affinities and disparities between his argument and the present investigation. Even though the present study of the numinous is not a Jungian study, some aspects of Bishop’s explication of the Jungian numinous—for example, that aesthetic experiences can be expressions of the numinous—are congruent with this study, while others are not. When Bishop, for example, describes the Jungian archetypal effect as a type of numinous factor that is de-metaphysicized, metaphysics is not rendered for this study as a conception of God or exterior deity, so that argument is not valid for this study. In the next chapter, the importance of aesthetics and art in the writings of Schopenhauer, who was a severe critic of religion and the God idea, is presented in order to subsequently be interwoven with a Husserlian transcendental phenomenological methodology, and other philosophical and phenomenological strands, to construct an original aesthetic of the numinous to investigate image consciousness in abstract art. The point here is that metaphysics is actually not defined in religious terms, but instead is described formally as “a branch of philosophy that deals with the first principles of things or reality” (“metaphysics”). There are other affinities and disparities. The assertion that life itself reflects a divine nature is not antithetical to this study, but the idea that the transcendent must be some exterior realm is incompatible with the inherent thesis here.

The Numinous and the Transcendent Experience

Some fundamental questions about the transcendent must be considered first. For example, do transcendent experiences actually exist, and if so what is a transcendent experience?
Sociological surveys report that a significant percentage of the Australian, British, and north-American population (from 35 percent up to 50 percent) recall having had a transcendent experience. A transcendent experience can be characterized as an event in which individuals, by themselves or in a group, have the impression that they are in contact with something boundless and limitless, which they cannot grasp, and which utterly surpasses human capacities. While many reach a positive judgment regarding the status of what has been apprehended, others discount such incidents a purely subjective and as not indicative of anything real. In contrast to this dismissive attitude, I would like to look at such experiences favorably and interpret them in accord with thinkers who envision the human self as essentially open to the infinite (Roy Transcendent xi).

Roy goes on to note that such experiences are likely to be of unequal value and may be problematic, even psychotic, in various ways, and describes the reasons he decided against a theological approach in favor of a “phenomenology of transcendent experience” (xii). The present study proposes several ways through the somewhat daunting labyrinth that arises when considering the varieties of the transcendent experience.

**Intentionality and the Numinous**

One gateway through that labyrinth is intentionality, which is also considered to some extent by Roy, but which cannot be fully explicated beyond an elementary orientation until the next chapter. For now, the reader should know that Husserl’s
three concepts of consciousness include: “(1) Consciousness as the entire, real (reelle) phenomenological being of the empirical ego, as the interweaving of psychic experiences in the unified stream of consciousness; (2) consciousness as the inner awareness of one’s own psychic experiences; (3) consciousness as a comprehensive designation for ‘mental acts’, or ‘intentional experiences’ of all sorts” (Husserl Logical Investigations vol 2, 81).

His third concept of consciousness, intentionality, is of deep interest to Husserl and is discussed at length and in much detail in all his writings except those on mathematics, but its relevance here is that Husserl declared intentionality to be “prior to all theories” (Husserl Phenomenological Psychology 9).^{112} This notion of intentionality as an antecedent event, one that occurs before conceptually encountering the object was introduced in Chapter One, along with Husserl’s intention to create an apodictic science via his transcendental phenomenology.

How does intentionality enter into this? Roy attempts to clarify this in his examination of the transcendent experience by noting that “human intentionality is an intersubjective capacity for reaching out to what exists; when such intentionality feels that it is in the presence of the mystery [which is to say in terms of this study, the numinous], it does encounter a reality” (Transcendent xii). Roy goes on to say that emotion enhances a person’s response to reality: “The feeling of being in touch with something absolutely transcendent is the affective side of an intentionality oriented toward the mystery” (Transcendent xii). Later, Roy resources the work of Bernard Lonergan, a Canadian philosopher-theologian who thoroughly studied intentionality:

Lonergan helps us move further away from the widespread
perceptualist model of mysticism, by clarifying the nature of consciousness. Inspired by Husserl, his intentionality analysis distinguishes the data of a twofold awareness: the objects of one’s operations, and the operations themselves. The human self who wants to know and interact with reality intends what is other than itself. In doing so, the inquiring subject is aware of both the intended objects and the several acts that constitute its intending. Difficult as it is to pinpoint, the intending is no less conscious than the intended, since people are conscious of their cognitive and affective operations (133).

That an accomplished scholar like Lonergan has understood the implications of one of the principles of Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology indicates how a Husserlian methodology within a fully developed aesthetic of the numinous can coherently address and respectfully explicate the many varieties of art having an element of the transcendent experience.

_Gfühl_

To return to Otto, in addition to the phenomenological complexities of intentionality, another means for navigating the varieties of the transcendent experience, one already touched on when Roy said “emotion enhances a person’s response to reality” (xii) is signaled in Louis Roy’s _Transcendent Experiences: Phenomenology and Critique_ in a chapter titled “Rudolf Otto and the Numinous.” Roy discusses Otto’s comments about feeling, and how the German expression _Gfühl_, although it can be translated as feeling or emotion, does not have the same meaning as the English word “emotional.” Otto notes that “_Gfühl_” is in some
ways more intensely magnified and penetrating than ordinary emotional expressions and can point to “a form of cognizance in an unconceptual or preconceptual way” (Roy Transcendent 106-107). Roy suggests that “Otto is involved in a forceful rehabilitation of feeling, in opposition to the rationalism of those who exalt conceptual thinking over against emotion” (107). Roy also suggests that for Otto Gefühl is a powerful emotional expression that is connected to a sensibility to the numinous.114

**Gefühl and the Numinous in the Artistic Process**

This study proposes to use Gefühl as an expression of a heightened version of emotion in the special sense suggested by Otto, one that can be understood as a nonconceptual or preconceptual means of cognizance, a form of intensified emotional awareness or perception that occurs prior to conceptual thought, even though it is likely to spark conceptual thought. In that context, Gefühl can be understood as a significant component in the creative processes of artists examined, so that within the thematic territory of this study, Gefühl serves as a kind of initiating fuel to drive the aesthetic consolidation of a sensibility to, or awareness of, the numinous with actual art-making and art-viewing activities, which ultimately blend and become a blur, so to speak, of a single dynamic.

Another way of describing this phenomenon is simply to say that all the artists considered in this study show some form of seeking the numinous through their art and their art commentaries; they were seeking as artists to communicate that seeking and understanding through their work. How did they do that?
If what one is sensing standing in front of a 12th century painting is the numinous, even if the viewer does not label that sensibility as the numinous, it is clear that ultimately descriptive words are secondary in that the art speaks in its own fullness with great visual articulation, whether it is a cave drawing of a bison or bear, a Chinese landscape, or a Rothko color field painting.
Chapter Four— Seeking the Numinous in Modern Art

The purpose of this chapter is to establish evidence—before explicating the work of Varo and Borges in more detail—attesting to the fact that many other modernist and contemporary artists have created work that reflects an aesthetic impulse rooted in a sensibility to the numinous. In other words, the purpose of this chapter and the next one is to lay the art historical and philosophy of art foundation for subsequently explicating, in the final chapter, the art of Varo and Borges.

Having already established in the foregoing chapter what the numinous is, the point now is to present instances in modern art-making that reflect artistic sensibility to the numinous. Far from being a complete survey or exhaustive investigation of the numinous in art, this chapter simply asserts that Varo and Borges were not the only artists working within this thematic territory. Processes examined at the end of this chapter, and subsequently in Chapter Six, investigates how and why Varo and Borges’s respective oeuvres pivot around their respective sensibilities to the numinous. In addition, it should be emphasized that, that with a few exceptions, visual art, and specifically the work of painters, is a primary focus; there simply is not space enough here to include relevant auxiliary topics such as photographic art and the broad stream of literature. Since Varo was a painter and Borges a poet, mostly paintings by other painters and a few poems by other poets will be referenced. The central intention is to show that modernist artistic interest in and sensibility to the numinous is well-known, albeit in a variety of verbal descriptions by critics and artists themselves, even if sometimes dismissed as being irrelevant to whatever work
has been created. Nonetheless, during the modernist era seeking what is described in this study as the numinous was a prevalent theme, and to some extent this theme did continue to a much less degree into what is generally considered to be the postmodernist era and beyond.

Another point to clarify is that while it may be true that a given artist is working via a sensibility to the numinous to create a work of art that is in some sense greater than the artist, or overpowering to the artist who is making the art, that kind of artistic practice may or may not be consciously what might be described as worshipping a presence. Certainly in some sacred or explicitly spiritualized contexts artistic practice serves a devotional purpose that is self-transcending in nature, but this is not necessarily what is consciously occurring when someone “allows” a sensibility to the numinous to fuel the art-making process. Nor is a viewer who is “allowing” a sensibility to the numinous in a participatory viewing process necessarily involved in a devotionally or consciously spiritual action. This seems obvious, and in the context here the sensibility to the numinous can be used in multifarious ways that may or may not be explicitly religious as Otto describes the numinous. Nor is this assertion unique. Artist and scholar Jungu Yoon describes in his *Spirituality in Contemporary Art: The Idea of the Numinous* his merging of three orientations to numinous, those of Rudolf Otto, C. J. Jung, and Mircea Eliade:

My own understanding of the numinous draws on all three definitions. Like Jung, I conceive the numinous to be an experience of an archetype. In contrast to Otto, however, I argue that this experience is not limited to the context of organized religious traditions. One
example of this can be seen in the East Asian idea of the numinous in Taoist philosophy, which is not dependent on the existence of a deity. However, it is unhelpful to conceive of Taoism and the numinous as interchangeable concepts, since Taoism makes no distinction between its understanding of the numinous and its understanding of natural mysticism. Therefore this interpretation is too all-encompassing and requires refining. Natural mysticism can be said to include the concept of the numinous, but at the same time it is more extensive and inclusive than the concept of the numinous itself (28-29).

Continuing with the line of thought, and regarding the present orientation to the numinous and any artistic sensibility to the numinous, a definite difference is apparent, for example, between a Tibetan Buddhist mandala painting created by an anonymous Buddhist monk, and an abstract painting created by a modernist painter, or an installation by a contemporary artist, even though a strong impulse so seeking the numinous may be evident in all three.

The Mandala of Vajradhatu (fig. 12), was created by a 19th century Tibetan monk who lived and practiced both esoteric spirituality and artistic expression of that esoteric spirituality within the parameters of a monastic community somewhat set apart from larger society. An important aspect of Tibetan Buddhism teachings is the transcendence of separative self-identification, a spiritual erasing of the artist’s personal identification, not as self-suppression, but as a gesture of self-expansion that includes all beings, a “feeling of mystic oneness apart from ordinary reality” (Bass, Smile 211). 116
A peripheral question to ask is whether anonymity is a key to the distinction between traditional esoterically oriented spirituality and the modernist sensibility to the numinous. This seems unlikely, given that artistic sensibility responds to the same ineffable mystery regardless of era and other circumstances. Can modern art reflect the same feeling sometimes assigned to what is called sacred art? This does seem possible.

Then there is the question of whether sacred art has influenced modernist art. While numerous connections to an aesthetic rooted in a sensibility to the numinous over the course of history are evident, one obvious artistic propinquity surfacing from
that alignment would be that of the modern artist influenced by an earlier sacred culture. Strong influences on artist Charmion Von Wiegand (1898-1983), for example, included her personal friendship with the Dutch modernist Piet Mondrian that yielded her 1940’s Neo-Plasticism geometric abstractions, and her later intense interest in and practice of Tibetan Buddhism. Her *Invocation to Adi Buddha* (fig. 13) does express the structural radiance of a Tibetan mandala, while also showing the earlier Mondrian influence, a fascinating combination of influences.

![Fig. 13. Charmion Von Wiegand. *Invocation to Adi Buddha*. 1968-70. Oil on canvas, 50x27 inches. Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York.](image)
One point that arises from this kind of juxtaposition is the universality of geometric elements in human culture, which element might even be described—if one reflects on the evolution of Paul Cézanne’s painting, for example—as being inherent in the natural world. Even though the modernist abstract geometric influence is perhaps more compositionally more evident in Von Wiegand’s painting (except for the Tibetan lettering at bottom), the 19th century Mandala of Vajradhatu (fig. 12) composition, while having numerous representational elements, remains like most Tibetan mandalas within a compositional geometric infrastructure of squares, circles, pyramids, or various straight divisional lines. At the same time, the geometric elements of both works, while visually prominent, are not the central feeling being expressed. The expressed feeling is a sensibility to the numinous, which while presented differently are nonetheless, to this viewer, analogous in sensibility.

To bring this into a more contemporary setting, it can be argued that Tibetan Buddhism scholar Robert A. F. Thurman’s “feeling of mystic oneness apart from ordinary reality” (quoted on page 149 by Bass) is also evident in contemporary artist Teresita Fernández’s Fire (fig. 14), albeit in a 3-dimensional rendering that is less like a mandala but nonetheless conveys a circular, contemplative, meditative quality that echoes Tibetan painting. The meditative quality merges with a dynamic quality of action in Fernández’s piece, and that amalgamation of the dynamic and contemplative is likewise a motif of Tibetan Buddhist mandalas. Both convey a sensibility to the numinous, even if that is not the exact wording that would ordinarily be used in a discussion of these two works.
Ultimately, this issue of discussing a sensibility to and seeking of the numinous is a matter of semantics—a botanist who is discussing some finer points of plant life may not use words like “vegetation” or “plant” at all in a discussion of photosynthesis, but that scientist is discussing a phenomenon universal to all plant life, even if more obvious in the specific type of tree or other vegetation that he or she is referencing and discussing.

![Fig. 14. Teresita Fernández. *Fire*, 2005. Silk yam, steel armature, and epoxy. 96 in x 144 in. Collection SFMOMA. (In the 2013 exhibition *Beyond Belief: 100 Years of the Spiritual in Modern Art*. A collaboration between the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Contemporary Jewish Museum SF.)](image)

**Modernist Abstraction and the Numinous**

Abstract art in general, and especially modernist abstract art, has been a genre closely associated with a seeking and revelation of the numinous. Kandinsky, Rothko, Mondrian, Malevich and many other abstract modernist artists openly discussed art as
a means of spiritually related expression. They discussed this in different ways, but what is proposed here is that they were attempting to discuss a common sensibility to the numinous.

In considering similarities between the Rothko color field painting (fig. 15) and the Chinese landscape (fig. 11, p.128), there is similar phenomenon of the miniscule within immensity. The tiny human figures at the bottom of the Chinese landscape and the intersecting multilinear-to-single-point in the center of the Rothko occur in midst of a domain of vastness (rather than vast domain), an overwhelming vastness. A disruption of perceptual scale and focus captures attention and allows a sense of being overwhelmed in consciousness. The heightened color in the Rothko with its chromatic afterimage effect that induces each colored segment to change the perceptual reality of adjacent segments occurs as a dynamic penetration, a motion in

![Fig. 15. Mark Rothko. No.5/No.22. 1949-1950. Oil on canvas. 297 x 272 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York.](image-url)
the midst of stillness, which to this viewer reflects a sensibility to the numinous. Just so, the Chinese peasants returning from work allows a similar dynamic rooted in that sensibility. That there is a sense of “prior” or precursory infinite unity, an inherent quality of the numinous, surfaces in both works. This is more than compositional mechanics, although the dynamic itself can appear in a great variety of ways. As Rothko, for example, famously said, "If you are only moved by color relationships, then you miss the point. I'm interested in expressing the big emotions—tragedy, ecstasy, doom" (Baal-Teshuva 50).

As artists working in some form of abstract imagery, the modernist artists were especially focused on understanding and communicating the implications of invisible reality. If we consider the pioneers of abstraction in the early twentieth century, many artists were aware of a sensibility to the numinous, albeit in a different context for each individual that evolved as a given artist’s work evolved into abstraction.

**Transcendental Phenomenological Influences on Abstract Art**

Husserl’s work as a primary means for investigating art and the numinous has already overflowed at times to working artists themselves. Alexandra Munroe, the Senior Curator of Asian Art at the Guggenheim and the curator of the exhibition *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860-1989*, discusses in that exhibition’s catalog the influence of phenomenology on Minimalist abstraction, and especially artistic interest in Husserl’s epochē. Munroe goes on to describe how west coast artists of that time such as Robert Irwin used Husserl’s epochē in another way, namely to “go back to the beginning and rethink …. [which] looks like the realm that
has always been the Orient, the East” (297).

In other words, artists such as Irwin used Husserl’s “questioning back” (Rückfragen) to locate the “primary foundation” (Urstiftung) (Moran and Cohen 70) in their creative processes, whether they used those phrases and concepts consciously or not. Phenomenological influences on artists stretch beyond using the Husserlian epochê, “back to the things themselves,” and “questioning back.” Discussing the influences of Asian art and aesthetics on sculptor Robert Morris and other American artists, Munroe also noted the parallels between phenomenology and Buddhism:

Unsurprisingly, the theories of Husserl and his disciples Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose writings on phenomenology were so influential among Morris and the Minimalist critics, have been analyzed in light of their parallels to and appropriations from the Madhyamaka and Yogacara traditions of Buddhism. These Western and Buddhist systems ground the ego-experienced spatio-temporal realm in a primordial consciousness and dismiss discursive consciousness (as ordinary or delusionary) in favor of a radical empiricism (297).

Again, one must remember that Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger were deeply influenced by Husserl, even if that influence has been only lightly acknowledged by some scholars. Even Heidegger and Derrida, both of whom veered away from Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology to establish their own phenomenologically rooted theories, acknowledged their intellectual debt to Husserl.
To continue with the topic at hand, if any outer artistic impulse is bracketed via Husserlian epochē, the artist can be observed allowing and receiving the mystery of the unrecognizable object, or the mystery of a reshaped irreal object. The artist receives the outer influence not just as recognition of natural beauty, but in Husserlian terms as givenness—an object is “given” to perceptual consciousness—(Lyotard 44) of the object itself. This orientation ultimately allows the artist to receive the givenness of the art object he or she has created, or even has visualized creating. The same process could be described as being a dynamic of givenness active in the participatory viewer who can see a modernist painting without instantly assigning conceptual or preconceptual attributes to a work of art.

**Invisibility and the Numinous**

While the significance of invisibility and the numinous in relation to individual artists is relevant, it is useful here to note that a sensibility to the numinous also surfaces through an interest in “the notion of a dimension behind the visible reality” (Müller-Westerman “Painting for the Future” 45). Often this interest coincided with an interest in scientific phenomena, especially microscopic cellular phenomena, but also the interest in invisibility led to or coincided with an interest in the occult. An interest in microscopic cellular phenomena can be found in the creative thinking and art-making of both Kandinsky and Duchamp, for example, two prominent but distinctly different artists—the former being the quintessential modernist, the latter being probably the best-known pioneer of postmodernism. Both expressed a passionate interest in the invisible world.

For now it is useful to acknowledge how the seminal role of intentionality,
when applied to art, can ultimately serve the aesthetic investigation not only of the art-making of Varo and Borges, but abstract modernist art as well—everything from Mondrian’s Neo-Plasticism and Kandinsky’s nonobjective abstraction to Hilma af Klint’s spiritualistically sourced paintings and the healer-pendulator Emma Kunz’s mandala-like geometric abstractions. These last two figures are more conceptual in their orientations than a casual observer might presuppose, given the occult contexts each of them functioned within and that to some degree prevented them and their work from being recognized by the broader mainstream art world during their lifetimes.\textsuperscript{118}

That early abstract artists like Kandinsky, Mondrian, Malevich, and Kupka were also interested in various degrees of occultism, especially through theosophy, is well documented.\textsuperscript{119} To reiterate a point, while this is not a study of occultism or spiritualism in art, but a philosophico-phenomenological investigation of the implications of wonder and the numinous in image consciousness, it is nonetheless useful and necessary to acknowledge the ways individual artists expressed these interests through their art-making, even if some of those ways seem eccentric or strange to mainstream society. A number of artists wrote or talked about aspects of a sensibility to the numinous. “The Futurist painter Umberto Boccioni (1882-1916), formulated the conversations of many of his avant-garde contemporaries as follows: ‘What must be painted is not visible, but that which was previously regarded as invisible, namely what the clairvoyant painter sees’ ” (Müller-Westerman “Painting for the Future” 45).
Not only the works of these famous artists attest to this focus. The work of lesser-known artists, including many of those sometimes categorized as outsider artists, also may reflect a connection between art-making and the numinous. For example, this needlework (fig. 16) by early-20th-century Swiss artist and psychiatric patient Johanna (Johanna) Natalie Wintsch (1871-1944) mixes enigmatic visual language with theosophical symbolism, giving expression to inner thoughts within private worlds.

**Inner and Outer Versions of Consciousness as Components of the Artistic Process**

Yet another consideration relevant to a seeking of the numinous is the distinction between inner and outer versions of the transcendent experience. The shifting focus on inner and outer experience is a recurring theme, one that is evident in the creative processes of many artists. All artists seem to have some degree of both inner and outer perceptual and art-making dynamics. Although an artist may feel that
he or she has a single and simple aesthetic for making art, one that is straightforward and without complexity, another artist may feel overwhelmed by complexity and multiple forms of consciousness.\textsuperscript{120}

Hilma af Klint, Emma Kunz, and Agnes Martin all stressed inner consciousness in their art:

The drawings of af Klint, Kunz, and Martin reflect the inner necessity of any creative activity as two-dimensional projections of a process beyond space and time. The emphasis rests on the fact that it is not the product that is the artwork but the working of the mind—the slow time

of viewing and thinking as working. Through a combination of perception, joy, and vision and a sense of reciprocity, their work has a dimension of both inner and outer coherence that sets it apart from the familiar conventions of Modernism and its avant-garde (de Zegher “Abstract” 37).

Agnes Martin is the most recognized and perhaps the least oriented to the occult of the three artists discussed here, but the point is that she, like Emma Kunz and Hilma af Klint, openly discussed the influences of what is being explicated here as the numinous. Her work is meditative and visionary, and she neither hid nor proselytized her interest in Zen Buddhism and other spiritual paths.

Fig. 18. Hilma af Klint. Altarpiece, No. 1, Group X. Altarpieces, 1915. Stiftelsen Hilma af Klints Verk.
Hilma de Klint, whose work has begun to gain some posthumous recognition, was, though a very private person, open about her interests in occult issues like “channeling.” That a sensibility and expression of the numinous is inherent in her paintings is obvious.

Fig. 19. Emma Kunz. *Work No. 014*. n.d.

Emma Kunz thought of herself as a healer and researcher. In fact, Kunz, who usually did not give her drawings a title or date, “considered her artistic practice to be a process of research and discovery” (Teicher 127).

The end result of the abstract art of Martin, af Klint, and Kunz—each created via distinctively personal approaches—is that they each felt a inner sensibility to the numinous and attempted to outwardly express that sensibility via art.

How does that sensibility manifest prior to making art? To some extent, although not exclusively, modernist non-objective modernist abstraction developed as
a means to reflect an invisible numinous gateway that becomes visible through the experience and phenomenon of wonder. Some of the later paintings of Gordon Onslow Ford, for example, visually transmit the unfathomable wonder and beauty of deep space. Ford was the youngest and last surviving member of the 1930s Paris Surrealist group associated with André Breton, and he was also a friend of Remedios Varo when she lived in Paris and later in Mexico. Some of the exhibition names of Ford’s work invoke his sense of space: *Surrealism: New Worlds, Stellar Orbits*, and *Voyager and Visionary.*

![Fig. 20. Gordon Onslow Ford, *Constellations in Hand*, 1961](image)

Parle's paint and aqua polymer on canvas, 72 1/8 in. x 108 in. Collection SFMOMA © Estate of Gordon Onslow Ford.

Ford also expressed an interest in theory and philosophy, and thus occasionally spoke or wrote about his lifelong interest in the metaphysical significance of the artistic process. Like many modernist artists, Ford also had some sense of the value of Asian aesthetics.

To use a more contemporary example, Robert Percy, who worked as a studio
assistant to Ford in California for several years, and who is an accomplished
contemporary abstract artist in his own right, has long reflected in his work a vividly
developed sensibility to Asian aesthetics. Percy’s calligraphic uses of brushes, Sumi-e
ink, casein, and kozo paper reflect a general orientation to his art that is rooted in trips
to China and Japan, and come together to erase any east-west dichotomy.¹²¹

![Image of Robert Percy's painting](image)

Fig. 21. Robert Percy, *Same-in-All*, 2004.
Collection of the Artist, Marin County, California.

The Asian influence on Percy’s work also serves to visually illustrate some
points surfacing in Schopenhauer’s interest in Hinduism and Buddhism, and in the
influence of Asian aesthetics on western artists altogether. An aspect of Percy’s
aesthetic—described by him in vernacular terms as “Whatever happens happens”—
actually reflects a complex sequence of artmaking techniques that are clearly related
to his study of calligraphic art.\textsuperscript{122}

It is useful to remember that artistic abstraction actually did not originate in the twentieth century. This point was made by a contemporary cultural critic in a

![Illustrations](image_url)

\textit{Fig. 22. Illustrations accompanying G. Roger Denson’s exhibition review, Huffington Post review of the 2013 Museum of Modern Art exhibition in New York, \textit{Inventing Abstraction, 1910-1925}:}

Shouldn't the most authoritative of our cultural institutions be as mindful of the language used in representing the history of international art, especially a history in which mitigating the injuries historically wrought by political and cultural colonizations still within memory are required to facilitate a new global civilization eager for crosscultural exchange? I'm referring to the title of the Museum of Modern Art's current exhibition, \textit{Inventing Abstraction, 1910-1925}. It
may seem a benign choice of words to Europeans and Americans who have been educated with little orientation to our former roles as colonizing nations, but to art audiences from the myriad nations with whom we are building the new global agora, the title conveys a dishonest attempt to sell the world on a genesis of abstraction that is entirely a modern European enterprise. How much more historically accurate and relevant the show’s title would have been had the curators added two small letters—the "Re" of Reinventing Abstraction.


While *Inventing Abstraction, 1910-1925*, was a significant exhibition, especially for any viewer interested in the history of modernism, Denson’s point is clearly valid, and remains relevant both for the MoMA exhibition and any study of abstract art. In fact, the Eurocentric bias in Western philosophy and art history is one reason for choosing and discussing the multicultural work of Schopenhauer in Chapter Five. Furthermore, an additional point to be noted is that in the examples Denson offered the cultures wherein those earlier examples of abstract art appeared did not need to justify or explain either the sacred nature or the aesthetic abstraction of those artifacts. One could argue that only a post-industrial, scientific materialist society would require the justification of the sacred or an explanation for a sensibility to the numinous in much abstract art.

For Kandinsky, perhaps the most influential and spiritually oriented of preeminent modernist abstract artists, inner and outer versions of consciousness
remain germane to his creative process. Whether or not there is, philosophically and phenomenologically speaking, an actual genuine distinction between “inner and outer” is a complex issue that will not be addressed in this study. However, the difficulty inherent in explicating the intuitive property of what Kandinsky called inner necessity, or is called here a version of a sensibility to the numinous, signals why this is such a challenging topic, especially given that Kandinsky was far more open about his work being a conjunction of spirituality and art than most modern artists, including other modernists, but also including postmodernists.

At this juncture, then, it is useful to consider the work of an artist who is usually considered by many to be the original postmodernist in spite of his modernist beginnings and his longtime friendships with modernist artists such as Francis Picabia.

Fig. 23. Composition VIII, 1923, oil on canvas, 55x79
The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York
and many others.

**Search and Stoppage: Marcel Duchamp as Bridge**

Marcel Duchamp remains special for several reasons, not the least of which is how postmodernist aesthetics and art history adopted Duchamp’s work as the marker that initiated postmodernism. Duchamp’s *Fountain* (fig. 24), for example, is sometimes considered to be *the* seminal work of postmodernist art, and there are reasons for that:

Were the readymades art because Duchamp declared them to be, or were they “based on a reaction of visual indifference, a total absence of good or bad taste, a complete anesthesia,” as he argued much later, and so a challenge to such authority? Never shown in its initial guise, *Fountain* was suspended in time, its questions deferred to later moments. In this way it became one of the most influential objects in twentieth-century art well after the fact (Foster, el al 129).

![Fig. 24. Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, 1917 (1964 replica) Readymade: porcelain, 36 x 48 x 61.](image)
Thus Duchamp is discussed here at some length, partly to make the point that an artistic seeking of the numinous is not an isolated incident relevant only to a few modernist artists, and partly to emphasize (albeit in what is not the usual thematic orientation for such a proposal) that the impulse of seeking the numinous is a theme that actually does bridge the divide between modernism and postmodernism, even if, in the latter, via a more disguised and convoluted style.

Duchamp also referenced and discussed at length here to emphasize that this study is not simply about modernism and the numinous, nor about abstraction and the numinous. The sensibility to the numinous extends far beyond art history and art theory categories. An aspect of this study is that a sensibility to the numinous is ultimately a universal phenomenon. Thus one could naturally ask why a universal sensibility should be restricted to a modernist trope, or why postmodernist and contemporary art should represent exclusions from the present theme, even if emphasized less than in the earlier so-called modernist era?

Two figures who were friends with modernist artists as well as friends with each other, and who are both sometimes considered to be both modernist and postmodernist artists, are Marcel Duchamp and John Cage. Cage’s work, which is primarily influential in music, performance art, and fluxus will not be considered here, even though to some degree the work of both of these artists straddles modernism and postmodernism and simultaneously expresses a strong interest in the numinous, even if that interest is seldom acknowledged in the world of art scholarship. This lack of acknowledgment is especially true of scholarship about Duchamp.¹²³

At first glance, it would seem that Duchamp is not very interested in topics
like the numinous and wonder. That is, however, a presumption. The fact is, Duchamp did at times express a passionate interest in a merging of spirituality and art—in spite of his iconoclastic orientation to art and the art world:

Religion has lost much of its territory and it is no longer a source of spiritual values. [It is up to the artist] to conserve the great spiritual tradition with which even religion, it would seem has lost contact...[and] keep the flame of inner vision, which the work of art is perhaps the most faithful interpreter for profane man (Chalupecky 136).

Fig. 25. Marcel Duchamp. *Network of Stoppages*. Paris 1914. Oil and pencil on canvas, 58 5/8" x 6' 5 5/8" (148.9 x 197.7 cm). Museum of Modern Art, New York.
Duchamp’s aesthetic orientation is not easy to summarize. One might say that a map is required, and in fact, one of Duchamp’s works, *Network of Stoppages* (Fig. 25) is a map of sorts. When viewing *Network of Stoppages* what registers first for this viewer is a quality of meaningful beauty, a kind of cartographic beauty that, like most maps, can be translated into a topographical territory of exploration. One visual expression, then, is that of a neurological map of circuitry or synaptic networking within the brain’s cortex, which in visual art is related to the perceptual mechanics of seeing, or related to neurobiology and neuroaesthetics, and ultimately can be understood as the physical neurological side of aesthetics. Viewing *Network of Stoppages* as a map of search and stoppage, as well as invisibility and alterity, is akin to exploring the geography of unknown territories via a multiplicity of routes, junctions, starts and stoppages. All but one of the lines in *Network* go “off the map” and into the black, but all lines have barrier-like marks and definite stops.

One means to describe Duchamp’s art-making orientation as a kind of search and stoppage phenomenon is to consider the titles of several of Duchamp’s works. Besides combining *Network of Stoppages* and the precursory and historically significant *3 Standard Stoppages* (figs. 23-24), the term “search and stoppage” also describes Duchamp’s style of working in which he would combine actual artworks, as is essentially the case with *Network of Stoppages*.

To what extent was Duchamp conscious of his work as even being a search, and how did he perceive it? As seen in the quotations, usually from interviews, there were times when Duchamp openly connected the numinous and art, yet given his
somewhat indecipherable character, as well the way his oblique and ironic approach to investigation merged with an admirable contempt for labels or categorization, Duchamp’s seeking of the numinous remains largely indefinable by conventional language. Is it even about art as commonly defined? Duchamp’s work has been described as “Art as Anti-Art” (Mink 3).

When considering the areas of investigation and exploration that influenced Duchamp’s search, it is clear that to describe his search as “spiritual” would be inaccurate, given that word’s religious connotations. The numinous, with its characteristic invisibility and inherent universal quality is—given Duchamp’s intense interest in invisibility and his impulse to break loose from the confines of the art world and “retinal painting”—a more accurate indicator of his search.

Also relevant is that Duchamp was an artist-philosopher, although his was a more metaphysical orientation to search—“metaphysical” in the most general sense of a “philosophical investigation of the nature, constitution, and structure of reality” (Audi 153). Metaphysical is in fact the descriptive term Duchamp least resisted, though he questioned the validity of even that word. Asked by William Seitz which adjective he would use to describe his work, Duchamp replied:

Metaphysical if any. And even that is a dubious term. Anything is dubious. It’s pushing the idea of doubt in Descartes... to a much further point than they ever did in the school of Cartesian: doubt in myself, doubt in everything...in the end it comes to doubt the verb “to be” (Ades, Cox, Hopkins, Marcel Duchamp, 61).
It should be noted that because Duchamp did not define his own search as spiritual does not mean that he considered irrelevant or false the emphatically stated interests in the confluence and conjunction of spirituality from Kandinsky and other artists. In 1912 in Munich, for example, Duchamp purchased Kandinsky’s *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* and subsequently translated it from German into French for his brothers (Howard 166). This is not irrelevant. The catalog to the 1986 Los Angeles County Museum of Art exhibition, *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*, notes the inclusion of this book: “Duchamp’s copy of Kandinsky’s book, with his own extensive translations, is presented” (Tuchman 47).

Although one scholar noted that “no artist could be more diametrically opposed to Kandinsky than Duchamp” (De Duve 159), another points out that Duchamp, in a letter to Jean Crotti in 1920, “proposed a scheme to transform the chessboard into a shifting field of symbolic color strikingly reminiscent of Kandinsky’s theory of color essence in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*” (Joselit 159). The fact is, Duchamp was friends with Kandinsky and respected him, even visiting the Kandinskys in Paris not long before Kandinsky’s death.

Part of the issue here is that Duchamp, unlike Kandinsky and others, seldom disclosed the details of his inner aesthetic experiences *except* through his art. For example, while Duchamp’s artist sister Suzanne and her husband Jean Crotti “openly examined occult notions in their paintings” even though “in Duchamp’s work such ideas were characteristically hidden” (Tuchman 46-47), this was a difference in communication that reflects Marcel’s relatively undisclosed approach to everything. His own interests in the influences of occultism and spirituality on the art of that time
may have been largely concealed, but this was an open topic for his family and friends.

Since Duchamp said and wrote very little about anything in a straightforward and explicit manner, what is most accurate, though admittedly weak in its generality, is to simply acknowledge Duchamp’s search (without adjectival labels) as his attempt to understand what cannot be seen with ordinary vision, which includes not only invisible force or structure, but also forms of alterity and chance. Interviews with Duchamp over the years have provided some of the documented resources that are most relevant to understanding his search. Also relevant are interviews in some cases referencing earlier comments in previous interviews, as in the following 1967 exchange with curator and author Lanier Graham. In it, Graham refers to a conversation the artist had with American critic J.J. Sweeney a decade earlier. This excerpt also reflects Duchamp’s orientation to philosophical interpretation, including his opposition to defining art with words:

**Graham:** It seems that almost from the beginning of your work as an artist, you have had a philosophical attitude toward what being an artist is. In one of your interviews with Sweeney, for example... you describe Dada as a “metaphysical attitude.” What you have talked about and written is permeated with the thought-feelings of a philosopher. At the end of your 1956 interview with Sweeney, you spoke of art as a path "toward regions which are not ruled by time and space."

**Duchamp:** Was that the one filmed in Philadelphia?
Graham: It was.

Duchamp: Yes. Perhaps that is about as much as you can say in a film being made for wide consumption. If one says too much more, the result is simply a great deal of misunderstanding. Understanding can emerge from a co-experience, a non-verbal experience which the artist and the onlooker can share by means of aesthetic experience. So I leave the interpretation of my work to others.

Graham: Nevertheless, I think it would be correct to say that you regard the practice of art as a philosophical path toward that which is beyond time and space.

Duchamp: That is correct. This is my view, but only part of my view. My view is beyond and back. Some get lost “out there.” My frame of reference is out of the frame and back again.

Graham: That sounds like the dance of the finite and infinite, stepping back and forth between three dimensions and four dimensions, as Apollinaire or Mallarme would say.

Duchamp: So it does. No one says it better than Mallarme!

Graham: May we call your perspective Alchemical?

Duchamp: We may. It is an Alchemical understanding. But don’t stop there! If we do, some will think I’ll be trying to turn lead into gold back in the kitchen [laughing]. Alchemy is a kind of philosophy, a kind of thinking that leads to a way of understanding. We may also
call this perspective Tantric (as Brancusi would say), or (as you like to say) Perennial (Graham 41-43).  

I Irony is one of the keys to understanding Duchamp. In regards to “stoppage,” for example, it has been pointed out that Duchamp intended 3 Standard Stoppages, made in 1913-1914, as a play upon the rigidity of officially imposed standards of measure:

As much is suggested in its French title 3 Stoppages Etalon, [it is] supposed to play on the word ‘stoppages’ meaning to mend invisibly (a shop sign in Paris carrying the word had inspired Duchamp), so that it can be said he is imposed upon us legally and scientifically” (Parkinson 114-115).

There is another meaning to the English word stoppage, one more literal in that it also expresses the evolutionary development of Duchamp’s work:

An evolutionary sequence is really a network of catastrophes: development occurs through an irregularity that escapes a general peril. Evolution moves by collisions, weaknesses, failures, accidents; it only looks tidy and teleological after the fact, and to the outsider. Similarly, Duchamp’s career has its stalls, lurches, and burnouts, with development evidencing itself only after mutations and adjustments have occurred (Masbeck 1).

Duchamp’s abandonment of what he called “retinal painting” in 1912 represents a form of stoppage, perhaps his most dramatic one. Later he would also
“retire” from being an artist, though as stated here, abandonment might be a more apt description:

This process of “retirement” was already well under way by the end of 1912 because, amazingly, at the moment of his greatest triumphs as a painter, Duchamp decided to abandon painting...apparently bored with the process of painting, had now given up the idea of a career of as a painter, enrolling in a librarian’s course at the Ecle des Chartes in late 1912 instead (Parkinson 27).

Over time Duchamp’s interests in investigating forms of invisibility merged with his stated emphasis on restoring the mind’s preeminent role to art making as a source of ideas and conceptual thought, a role he felt had been lost in “retinal painting.” Two specific factors that remained stable despite Duchamp’s capricious nature—his interest in invisibility and his innate attraction to alterity—steadily informed and fueled his impulse to understand reality. Duchamp’s interest in invisibility along with multifarious kinds of alterity fueled the combination of search and stoppage, the latter being yet another multiple or layered factor in Duchamp’s existence, and thus in his work:

Marcel Duchamp’s art operates on more than one level of meaning and in more than one dimension of form. Disliking the exoteric, Duchamp’s esoteric mind created images which would open upon hidden perspectives beyond the merely visible (Masbeck 72-79).
Professor Linda Dalrymple Henderson’s scholarship in both her *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidian Art in Modern Art*, and in her *Duchamp in Context: Science and Technology in the Large Glass and Related Works*, can be described as two original and penetrating examinations of Duchamp’s fascination with invisibility and his search for underlying reality, or reality as it might exist through and beyond the senses, and especially that version of reality that may manifest as a force, presence, or idea beyond the readily apparent physical and materialistic version of reality. In other words, Duchamp’s intense interest in invisibility and his search for underlying reality substantiates the assessment here of his seeking the numinous.

![Fig. 26. Marcel Duchamp, *Portrait of Dr. R. Dumouchel*, 1910. Oil on canvas. 100 x 65 cm. Philadelphia Museum of Art](image)
Duchamp’s interests and investigations of occultism, alchemy, electromagnetism, radioactivity, x-rays, and various other natural and technological phenomena are linked to visual perception and art. The first artistic evidence of Duchamp’s interest in “invisibility” is in his 1910 Portrait of Dr. Dumouchel (fig. 26), with the aura around the hands of the figure as an expression of magnetism, popular at that time. Duchamp’s use of an aura in that painting, signals an interest in the numinous:

A curious coloured emanation surrounds the figure’s hand and head are haloed in a deeper pink, which indicate the subject’s possession of special powers. The probable source is the idea of the aura as promoted in Theosophical writings such as Annie Besant and Charles Leadbeater’s [1896] Thought Forms (Ades, Marcel Duchamp, 26).

Another influence often suggested was Duchamp’s mentor during that time, Czech painter, Theosophist, and spiritualist medium Frantisek Kupka, who was an early artistic explorer of X-ray imagery (Henderson, Duchamp 3-4). Along with those influences should be added the wide-ranging conversations the Duchamp brothers participated in with the Paris “Salon Cubists”, who debated topics such as simultaneity and the fourth dimension (Ades, Marcel Duchamp, 36).

Duchamp’s study of non-Euclidean geometry and the fourth dimension exceeded even the consideration of these elements in Cubist theory. Speaking in general, the investigation among pre-WWI artists of X-rays as evidence of perceptual relativity, however, served as a precursor to exploring “higher spatial realms” (Henderson, Duchamp 4) and also provided a neutral topical territory where in
science and occultism could co-exist and exchange influence, experimental evidence, and possibility. His deep interest in chance also points to a version of seeking the numinous: “Another notorious Duchampian pursuit, never before considered from an exclusively esoteric perspective, is that of Chance, *le Hasard*” (Moffitt 304). Moffitt goes on to describe Duchamp’s reading of Pierre Camille Revel’s book on the laws of chance:

Revel’s work was “esoteric” in that he also studied and wrote about the transmigrations of spirits or metempsychosis. This is especially important to mention since Revele’s two-part book, as published in 1905, presently remains the single documented, published source for Duchamp’s notorious preoccupation with *le Hasard*, or Chance (304-305).

Describing Revel’s books as “the single documented, published source” may make literal sense, but experience is a major factor for Duchamp as well, as becomes evident when one reads some of Duchamp’s comments about the role of “chance” in several published interviews, including in an interview with Katherine Kuh. In response to Kuh’s question, “Has the accidental played a role in your work?” Duchamp said:

My first accidental experience (what we commonly call chance) happened with the *Three Stoppages*, and as I said before, was a great experience. The idea of letting a piece of thread fall on a canvas was accidental, but from this accident came a carefully planned work. Most important was the accepting and recognition of this accidental
stimulation. Many of my highly organized works were initially suggested by just such chance encounters (Kuh 92).

How does Duchamp’s *Network of Stoppages*, now in the Museum of Modern Art in New York, visually register elements inherent in Duchamp’s art-making that are relevant to his quest to understand reality? As already emphasized, Duchamp’s native impulse toward search and stoppage are visually expressed in the cartographically styled graphic dynamics in *Network of Stoppages*, while his fascination with invisibility and alterity become apparent in that work, regardless of a variety of possible thematic interpretations of that work. Search, stoppage, invisibility, and alterity are interrelated in a variety of ways in Duchamp’s art. For example, when considering how the artist actually made *Network of Stoppages* and how it relates to his work both previously and subsequently, those four key elements—search, stoppage, invisibility, alterity—visually surface.

Although this paper is not an investigation of Duchamp’s interest in alchemy as proposed and investigated by some scholars, one might say that these four themes of search, stoppage, invisibility and alterity are like elements in an alchemical process. This process does unfold as a stirring of multiple dynamics, or as a swirl of amalgamations and disintegrations, all of which repeatedly resurface as artistic means and even as specific motifs in Duchamp’s work, as well as reflecting biographical details in his life.

Nonetheless, given the plethora of interpretations and presumptions and theories about Duchamp and his art, a single definitive study of him and his work remains unlikely, if not impossible. Multiple interpretations of Duchamp and his
work arise because, as art historian David Joselit wrote, “There is no single Marcel Duchamp but many” (Joselit 3).

It should be noted here that Joselit’s insightful scholarly study of Duchamp begins with an interpretation of Network of Stoppages that considers how that work “summarizes his cubist art,” and also notes its positioning between 3 Standard Stoppages and The Large Glass (fig. 30). Joselit goes on to suggest that “Network of Stoppages is structured as an agonistic and gendered form of semiosis in which a feminine body is submitted to a masculine graph” (9-18).127

There are two splits, or alternate routes that eventually rejoin, and there are multiple off shoots, which end in their own unique stops. The lines shapes are actually made from the curved meter measure templates created from the way lines of the 3 Standard Stoppages. The painting Network of Stoppages uses each of the stoppages three times to describe the nine channel-like lines which touch and join together into a two-dimensional pattern suggestive of circuitry, but which actually are the “capillary tubes” of The Large Glass. The black lines with white shadow or seemingly illuminated capillary tubes appear, one might assert, to be aura-like visual expressions of search and stoppage. Thus, in addition to the numerous visual stoppages, there is a sense of alterity, of chance and of choice in this visual network. Invisibility comes into play when one considers how Duchamp made this work, which is directly related to his 3 Standard Stoppages.

As is often the case with Duchamp, irony extends even to sequential relationships between individual pieces; if Network of Stoppages is “his only thoroughly abstract painting” (Masbeck 16), its source, so to speak, 3 Standard
Stoppages, is “a monument in Duchamp’s development of an aesthetic of chance” (16).

Fig. 27. Marcel Duchamp. 3 Standard Stoppages. Paris 1913-14. Wood box 11 1/8 x 50 7/8 x 9" with three threads 39 3/8", glued to three painted canvas strips 5 1/4 x 47 1/4" each mounted on a glass panel 7 1/4 x 49 3/8 x 1/4", three wood slats 2 1/2 x 43 x 1/8" (6.2 x 109.2 x 0.2 cm), shaped along one edge to match the curves of the threads. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Fig. 28. Marcel Duchamp. 3 Standard Stoppages. Paris 1913-14. Secondary Images
Duchamp considered *3 Standard Stoppages* a breakthrough moment in 1913:

That was really when I tapped the mainspring of my future. In itself it was not an important work of art, but for me it opened the way—the way to escape from those traditional methods of expression long associated with art. I didn’t realize at the time exactly what I had stumbled on. When you tap something, you don’t always recognize the sound. That’s apt to come later. For me the Three Stoppages was a first gesture liberating me from the past” (Kuh, *The Artist’s Voice*, 81).

*3 Standard Stoppages*, although not a readymade, does vividly demonstrate the role of chance in Duchamp’s work, albeit chance that is combined with precision, or as he described it in one of his dialogues with Pierre Cabanne, he had “canned chance” (47).

Parkinson also notes that Duchamp intended *3 Standard Stoppages* as a play upon the rigidity of officially imposed standards of measure and the connotation of “mend invisibly” in the word stoppage, “so that it can be said he is (a)mending with thread the unit of length imposed upon us legally and scientifically” (114-115). That Duchamp used three works, a painting and two drawings, to make *Network of Stoppages* itself attests to his use of alterity:

*Network of Stoppages* consists of three superimposed works, whose connections with each other may not be purely fortuitous. The earliest is an enlarged, unfinished version of *Young Man and Girl in Spring* probably dating from 1911. Its sides were then painted over with black bands to produce the dimensions of *The Large Glass*, in which he
drew a half-scale plan, consisted largely of measurements. The uppermost layer is the ‘network of stoppage’ itself, almost certain undertaken in 1914. Chance, then, in the guise of the 3 Standard Stoppages, equipped Duchamp with drawing instrument for The Large Glass (Ades, Marcel Duchamp, 81).

Fig. 29. Young Man and Girl in Spring, oil on canvas 1911

While this study is not a study per se of Marcel Duchamp’s work, it should be noted that elements in both 3 Standard Stoppages and Network of Stoppages are intricately involved in other works by the artist, including his The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even, (The Large Glass) (fig. 30). That Duchamp merged the two drawings for his Large Glass with the 1911 Young Man and Girl in Spring
speaks to the relevance of that work as a reflection of what occurred in Duchamp’s artistic process both before and after *3 Standard Stoppages*. For *Network of Stoppages* Duchamp rotated *Young Man and Girl in Spring* and incorporated the two

Fig. 30. Marcel Duchamp, *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)*, 1915-23. Oil, varnish, lead foil, lead wire, and dust on two glass panels. 9’ 1 1/4 “ x 69 1/4 “. Philadelphia Museum of Art.
drawings for *The Large Glass*. This incorporation reflects a sensibility that is related to invisibility as well, since one must look closely at *Network of Stoppages* (fig. 25, p. 176) to even see the three works made into one.

Another point is that *Network of Stoppages* can be read cartographically not only temporally as a record of the “past” *3 Standard Stoppages* and the “future” *The Large Glass*, but also as a visual work representative of Duchamp’s modernist cubist root that he abandoned and the postmodernist and conceptualist work that would be described as “readymades.” In that sense, Duchamp’s *Network of Stoppages* is a statement of a transition in the history of modern art, which might be described as a record or primary example of the transition from modernism to postmodernism.

Taking this orientation to Duchamp’s work as a dynamic of that modernist-to-postmodernist transition farther and relevant to the present thematic context, it was Duchamp’s search that fueled that dynamic. To say that, for example, *The Large Glass* is an example of conceptual art, or was an idea made into art, is not entirely accurate since Duchamp was seeking, among other purposes, to move beyond art:

**Pierre Cabanne:** “Several interpretations of *The Large Glass* have been given. What is yours?”

**Marcel Duchamp:** I don’t have any, because I made it without an idea. There were things that came along as I worked. The idea of the ensemble was purely and simply the execution, more than descriptions of each part in the manner of the catalogue of “Armed de Saint-Etienne” [a sort of French “Sears, Roebuck”]. It was a renunciation of
all aesthetics, in the ordinary sense of the world...not just another manifesto of new painting (Cabanne 42).

Ultimately even androgyny, another manifestation of his attraction to alterity and chance, remained insufficient for Duchamp, primarily because of his intention to leave art behind in the wave of his art-making:

They [androgyny and chance] remained gestures...Duchamp came to resemble a religious figure, a visionary, an ecstatic, a shaman. In any case, he was well aware of how close the artistic and the religious experiences were to each other. At the same time he argued against all religious systems, and against the Christian system in particular, and this was done in the same spirit in which he attempted to keep his activities from being classified as “aesthetic”, that is, classified with the established system of art. He was interested in something more original. He spoke of himself as an “anartist” and at the same time, of the “parareligious” nature of artistic experience. Both expressed his conviction that mere immanence, mere dependence on an existence enclosed in the given world, was not enough. As far as Duchamp was concerned, therefore, art should be more like a religious act than the manifestation of a skill. It had to have some relationship to the transcendent dimension of existence” (Chalupecky 133).

Admittedly, that statement is an interpretation of Duchamp, as is this Duchampian section of the present study. Nonetheless, including Duchamp is necessary and valid in order to interpret Duchamp’s art and art-making as an example
not only of straddling the divide between modernism and postmodernism, but also as an example of seeking the numinous. Duchamp’s oblique and ironic approach to his art does not annul that seeking impulse, although obviously it complicates and camouflages it.

This consideration of Duchamp leads to a consideration especially of Borges’s work, since he too was a master of complication and camouflage.

**The Numinous and the Irreal Fabulism of Varo and Borges**

Now that the widespread impulse towards and sensibility to the numinous in modernism and postmodernism has been noted, how is this applied to the work of Varo and Borges? With these two artists another layer of complexity surfaces. That distinction might be distilled down to the word narrative, or in essence, storytelling. Varo and Borges are working in irrealism and fabulism. Their art is not ineffable or abstract (although one could argue that in some respects their work is ineffable because it is irreal).

There are floods of recognizable elements, albeit presented in a wide variety of appearances. While one might argue that irrealism is a form of abstraction, it is not abstract in the sense of modernist abstract art that seeks to express the numinous. Non-objective abstract art is a visual rendering of the ineffable qualities of abstraction. Irrealism is related to surrealistic abstraction, yet that it is not purely surrealistic has been discussed in the introduction. However, the irreal fabulism of Varo and Borges is very much about the rupture of so-called reality, wonder, that opens onto the mutable, dynamic, and seemingly invisible territory of the numinous. Part of the argument here is that the fabulist art of Varo and Borges represents a version of
seeking and locating the numinous that is more *humanly* oriented than non-objective abstract art. Memory, fantasy, image consciousness, and the dynamic energies of subjectivity as described in the previous chapter, all have salient functions in the art of Varo and Borges, as will be fully disclosed and elucidated in Chapter 6—Art as Life—Varo and Borges as Artist-Philosophers. Until then, the next chapter on aesthetic thinkers and intertextuality will provide the general groundwork for the conjunction of philosophy and art that becomes evident in the artist-philosopher.
Chapter Five—Philosophico: An Intertextual Orientation to Aesthetic Thinkers

The work of several thinkers remains central to the thematic territory of understanding the roles of wonder, the numinous, and image consciousness in Varo and Borges’s fabulist art, including the writings of Edmund Husserl, Arthur Schopenhauer, Rudolf Otto, all of whom were influenced to some extent by Immanuel Kant and Plato. While Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology, examined in the opening chapter, forms the central methodological means for investigating art and art theories, this chapter brings other philosophical concepts to the forefront, especially the concepts in Arthur Schopenhauer’s aesthetic philosophy. Two other figures whose work serve an elucidation of Borges and Varo are Mikhail Bakhtin and Georges Bataille.

**Schopenhauer**

Schopenhauer’s work combines well with other features here. As mentioned earlier, Borges made clear over his lifetime that Schopenhauer was, for Borges himself, the consummate philosopher. Other points are that Schopenhauer does acknowledge the role of wonder in philosophy and art, and his aesthetic reflects a global orientation that can mitigate the limitations of Eurocentric, scientific materialist, and Christian-Judaic exclusivity in thought and art. An additional positive feature is that Schopenhauer's writing style is for the most part clear and accessible. It is interesting to note that as a teenager, he spent some time in a boarding school in England, where he learned to fluently speak and write English, which influenced his writing style thereafter. The challenge in working with Schopenhauer’s writings
have less to do with his writing style and more to do with the occasional ambiguous and contradictory aspects of some of his concepts. Nonetheless, Schopenhauer’s philosophy of art is, thematically speaking, an appertaining and necessary element for this dissertation.

**Schopenhauer and Art**

The predominant point about Schopenhauer is that art is of seminal importance in his thought. His emphatically positive assessment of artistic genius, and the positive and liberating role he assigns to art in a world dominated by the highly negative aftereffects of the will and its selfish, survivalist self-fulfillment have greatly influenced musicians, writers, and artists, from Wagner to Beckett (Jacquette “Schopenhauer’s Metaphysics” 1). In regards to art scholarship, modernist, postmodernist and contemporary thinkers and artists have studied Schopenhauer’s aesthetic philosophy and found it relevant to understanding the uniquely important role of art in the world. While discussing Schopenhauer’s influence on nineteenth and twentieth century traditions, for example, Dale Jacquette points to the relevance of Schopenhauer for understanding modern and contemporary art and philosophy:

> With its roots firmly embedded in a particular interpretation of Plato, Kant, and Asian philosophy, Schopenhauer’s theory sheds light on these important intellectual and mystical religious traditions. Through its diffusion into the history of post-nineteenth-century art, especially idealism, symbolism, romanticism, and certain phrases of naturalism and gothic and neoclassical rivals, Schopenhauer’s aesthetics provides the philosophical subtext for major artistic moments, as it does for
particular psychological and philosophical developments. It is consequently no exaggeration to say that Schopenhauer’s aesthetics is central to understanding the history of modern and contemporary art and philosophy of art (Jacquette, “Schopenhauer’s Metaphysics” 31).

Jacquette’s assertion that Schopenhauer’s aesthetic is key to understanding modern art and contemporary art, especially for providing, as stated above, “the philosophical subtext for major artistic moments,” signals the purposes of this chapter. The primary elements of a Schopenhauerian philosophy of art serve an explication of the thematic features of this study—wonder, the numinous, image consciousness—while also elucidating the broader implications of conceiving an intertextual philosophico-phenomenological orientation. It is important to consider how in the present context a Schopenhauerian aesthetic includes both metaphysical and phenomenological facets, as well as issues about how the contemplation of art and self-forgetting are related to subject and object. Beauty and a Schopenhauerian version of the numinous are key components to Schopenhauer’s philosophy of art, although that issue may be more frequently described in other studies as beauty and sublimity. Nonetheless, and as discussed in Chapter Three, the numinous and the sublime are so closely related as to be considered, at times, synonymous, and this subtopic needs to be revisited specifically in Schopenhauer’s work.

A part of Schopenhauer’s intense interest in the arts might be traced to the interest in all the arts that his parents passed to him. Besides an emphasis on education and reading, his parents took Arthur to art galleries, museums, theaters, and other artistic venues all over Europe (Cartwright lii). As an adult, Schopenhauer
continued these interests, including playing the flute daily for an hour as a break from
reading and writing.

Fig. 31. *Arthur Schopenhauer 1788-1860*
3 September 1852, Schopenhauer Archiv,
Stadtund Universitätsbibliothek, Frankfurt am Main

**Schopenhauer’s “Better Consciousness”**

Schopenhauer’s aesthetic philosophy cannot be separated from his general,
metaphysically oriented philosophy, which includes a passionate interest in consciousness:

Adapting the thought of both Plato and Kant, he had become convinced that there was a split between ordinary consciousness and a higher or “better” state in which the human mind could pierce beyond mere appearances to knowledge of something more real. The thought
had aesthetic and religious overtones: Schopenhauer wrote of both the artist and the “saint” as possessing this “better consciousness”—
though it should be said straightaway that his philosophical system is atheist through and through. He also struck one of the keynotes of pessimism, saying that the life of ordinary experience, in which we strive and desire and suffer, is something from which to be liberated. Such thoughts were well established in Schopenhauer’s mind by 1813 (Janaway, Schopenhauer, 6).

Although Schopenhauer did not describe his work “in any of the books that he prepared for publication” (Cartwright 125) as being pessimistic, the notoriety of his pessimism (Cartwright xl), when combined with his well-known anti-religious opinions and his rejection of the idea of an absolute (1) might seem to preclude any relevance to a study that emphasizes numinous sensibility. However, Schopenhauer’s writings about art are relevant to this study for the several reasons mentioned, and not simply because his extensive writings about the significance of art have influenced artists. Schopenhauer considered philosophy and art to be two means of resolving the same issue—existence, as when he wrote, “Not only philosophy but the fine arts too are fundamentally working toward solving the problem of existence” The World as Will and Presentation II, 459).

Thus it is necessary to ask, what is Schopenhauer’s general philosophy regarding the issue of existence? Beginning with his 1813 University of Jena doctoral dissertation, On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Ground: A Philosophical Treatise (Über die vierfache Wurzel des Satzes vom zureichenden
Grunde: Eine philosphische Abhandlung), Schopenhauer examines perceptual versus abstract presentations of objects in the world, and how we daily experience the world as an object. The first three versions of objective presentation are material objects, structures of space and time, and abstract concepts. Later, a fourth concept of an “inner” relation that is psychological in nature is also examined.

Schopenhauer’s 1819 magnum opus, The World as Will and Presentation (henceforth WWP I) is comprised of four large sections called books. In summary, Book One argues that the world is presentation; Book Two argues that the world must necessarily be viewed as will, which via desire and seeking, is the source of the world’s suffering, and to which all individuals, being caught up in the unrelenting force of the will, are enslaved; Book Three argues that aesthetic contemplation that allows a forgetting and loosening of separative self-identification eliminates willing in that individual, thus at least temporarily lifting the person out of suffering and enslavement to the will; and Book Four argues that another way of eliminating will in the individual is through denial of the will, essentially through an ascetic orientation (Janaway, Schopenhauer, 28-29). Schopenhauer argues that the daily experience of the world is an interactive subject/object dynamic—no object without a subject, and vice versa, no subject without an object. It has been noted that “for Schopenhauer, subjects and objects are thus of different, though complementary, metaphysical kinds” (Wicks 35). Thus it is necessary in this chapter to compare Schopenhauerian and Husserlian distinctions in regards to subjectivity, and the encountering and engaging of the art object.
**Vorstellung as “Presentation” in a Philosophico-Phenomenological Orientation**

An initial translation issue must be addressed before discussing Schopenhauer’s writings in more detail—namely, why in this study the English word “presentation” is used for the German *Vorstellung*. In the first volume of Schopenhauer’s *WWP*, his opening sentence, *Die Welt ist meine Vorstellung*, usually translated as “The world is my representation” (Schopenhauer, Payne, 3), points to an inherent translation challenge (Schopenhauer, Aquila xii). Among the words in that first sentence, *Vorstellung* has been translated into several different English words in translations of Schopenhauer’s writing, including representation, idea, and presentation, with “representation” being the most widely acknowledged English noun for *Vorstellung*, partly because of the widespread use of the 1958 Payne translation (Schopenhauer, Payne).134 “Idea” has also been used for *Vorstellung*, albeit less universally.135

This study uses the word “presentation” based on the 2008 Aquila and Carus translation (Schopenhauer, Aquila) for several reasons, even though translating *Vorstellung* as presentation may seem too literal. As Aquila states, “Etymologically, *Vorstellung* connotes placement in a position (*Stellung*) before (*vor*) or as present to someone” (xii). “Presentation” (along with “givenness” and “intentionality” and other concepts) was a key idea in the first chapter about the methodology fueling Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology. Thus using *Vorstellung* in the sense of presentation rather than as idea or representation is one means of strengthening a necessary bridge across any Husserlian-Schopenhauerian divide within the philosophico-phenomenological orientation to this treatise.
The translation of *Vorstellung* as representation is a Kantian rendering of *Vorstellung*, but this is neither a study of the Kantian aesthetic per se nor is this exclusively a Schopenhauerian-Husserlian dynamic. However, understanding *Vorstellung* as presentation allows a rudimentary combining of some common concepts pivoting around perception and image consciousness.

**Interwoven Phenomenological and Metaphysical Strands**

A few phenomenologically accentuated strands of both Schopenhauer’s general philosophy and his aesthetic philosophy parallel and merge with Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology. Presentation as givenness—something is given in consciousness—is a fundamental phenomenological understanding. While Aquila does not present Schopenhauerian presentation as a phenomenological concept, his description of Schopenhauer’s use of *Vorstellung* is not radically different from Husserl’s use:

> In any event, as suggested, the case for “presentation” goes hand in hand with the need to avoid the sense of *possession* generally attaching to possessive pronouns. More positively, the point is to promote what we take to be the central intention in Schopenhauer’s use of the term: not possession by, but presentation of objects to, a cognizant subject (xii-xiii).

A “presentation of objects to” above could easily be described as being given to consciousness, and Aquila’s point about avoiding the sense of possession signals how the topic of subjectivity has been philosophically explicated in a variety of ways.
Another approach Aquila recommends is to understand Schopenhauer’s use of the subject as a kind of witness or spectator, and presentation as a theatrical phenomenon:

With respect to this central sense, it may also be useful to note that the term *Vorstellung* is commonly used to refer to theatrical presentations. Several times, Schopenhauer in fact calls the side of the world that he calls *meine Vorstellung* a *Schauspiel*, or a “show” (or “play”): a show that is “mine” in the sense that I am its spectator. But as it turns out, it is also mine in another sense. Just as with the corresponding English term, *Vorstellung* can refer either to what is presented or to the processor action of presenting it (xiii). 136

On a humorous note, this sounds appropriate enough given Schopenhauer’s proclivity for human (and often contrarian) showmanship. While Schopenhauer’s aesthetic philosophy contributes to the *philosophico* side of the study, and Husserl’s transcendental phenomenological methodology contributes to the phenomenological side, there are also inverted and reversed approaches, as when Schopenhauer becomes somewhat phenomenological in his writings about vision or the object, or when Husserl discusses a philosophy of art topic that is more philosophical or metaphysical than it is phenomenological. Husserl, for example, sometimes discusses existential factors, and Schopenhauer discusses the significance and ramifications of perceptual mechanics and consciousness that do at times sound very similar to what one finds in key phenomenologists such as Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, and Heidegger.
Schopenhauer actually assigns a more far-reaching meaning and function to art than Husserl. In spite of that, an advantage of referencing the writings of both Schopenhauer and Husserl is that both thinkers considered the aesthetics of visual art within a larger context of perception that includes the seeing of all “things.”

**The Central Role of Intuitive Perception: *Anschauung***

In a broader Schopenhauerian and Husserlian thematic territory, topics like diversity and unity, the plasticity of visual mechanics, and classical aesthetic topics like the essence of beauty and the role of spontaneity can be considered. In a statement that serendipitously summons up Husserl’s epochê, Schopenhauer writes:

> In order to see that a purely objective and therefore accurate apprehension of things is only possible when we consider them without all personal involvement, thus under complete silencing of the will, we might call to mind how much every emotion or passion obscures and falsifies cognizance, indeed how every inclination or disinclination warps, colors, distorts—no, not merely, e.g., judgment—even the original perception of things (Schopenhauer, *WWP II*, 422-423).

In other words, the natural attitude needs to be bracketed out. Also, in his consideration of vision and intuitive perception, Schopenhauer argues for a knowledge he calls “pure understanding,” an essential argument worth reviewing in detail:

> All intuitive perception [*Anschauung*] is intellectual. For without *understanding* we could never arrive at intuitive perception,
observation, and apprehension of objects; rather, all would remain mere sensation, which could have at most a meaning in reference to the will as pain or comfort, but otherwise would be succession of states devoid of meaning and nothing resembling knowledge. Intuitive perception, that is, knowledge of an object, comes about first of all because the understanding refers every impression the body receives to its cause. It shifts this cause into the *a priori* intuitively perceived space—to the point from which the effect originates—and thus recognizes the cause as acting, or *actual*, that is, as a representation [presentation] of the same kind and class as the body. However, this transition from the effect to the cause is a direct, vivid, and necessary one, because it is knowledge of the *pure understanding*, not a rational conclusion, not a combination of concepts and judgements according to logical laws. The latter is instead the business of the *faculty of reason*, which contributes nothing to intuitive perception, and whose object is an entirely different class of representations [presentations] which on earth belongs solely to the human race—namely the abstract, not intuitively perceivable representations [presentations], that is, *concepts* (Schopenhauer, *On Vision*, 48).

Schopenhauer’s commitment to reason is important because he disallows, for the most part, any resort to supernatural or magical solutions that circumvent applications of conceptual thinking. While supernatural and magical elements in Varo and Borges’s work, or at least elements assigned in their work as supernatural or
magical descriptions or roles, do occur and must be acknowledged rather than ignored or avoided, it is important to permit intellectually accessible handholds, so to speak, to those elements to whatever degree that is possible. As noted earlier, any topic rooted in belief rather than experience is axiomatically rendered self-enclosed and invulnerable to investigation. Belief systems—scientific, religious, or philosophical—have little if any scholarly value here.

Generally, Schopenhauer used *Anschauung* to refer to “our apprehension of empirical objects, that is spatio-temporal particulars that stand in causal relations to others, like objects” (Cartwright 88). Schopenhauer also argued, contrary to Kant, that intuition requires no thinking or discursive thought (Cartwright 88). Nonetheless, “All intuitive perception [*Anschauung*] is intellectual” (Schopenhauer, *On Vision*, 48). When Schopenhauer explains that understanding is a precursor to “intuitive perception, observation, and apprehension of objects” (48), and that without intellectual understanding, there would be only sensation, which, while it could act as a reference to “will or pain or comfort” (48), could not lead to meaning or knowledge, the reader (whether agreeing or not with Schopenhauer’s arguments and concepts) receives a sense of the depth of Schopenhauer’s thought about perception and the world.

What also surfaces is evidence of Schopenhauer’s ambivalence, or at least his equivocal assessment of the role of intuition. On the one hand, intuition is a nondiscursive experience that underlies the phenomenon of reason creating abstract concepts, or as Cartwright states it, “Schopenhauer argued that intuition requires no thinking or discursive thought” (Cartwright 88-89), and yet, “all intuition is
intellectual” (88). Thus what role, if any, does not knowing or unknowing serve in Schopenhauerian philosophy? Is the sudden and initial experience of wonder a thinking experience for Schopenhauer? Does he even acknowledge wonder and the numinous? For Schopenhauer, the answers lie in part with the influence Plato and Kant had on his theories.

**Influences on Schopenhauer’s Aesthetic: Plato and Kant**

Schopenhauer, Husserl, and Otto were all influenced, albeit each in somewhat different ways, by Kant and Plato. The influences on Otto’s thought were discussed in the chapter on the numinous, but Schopenhauer and Husserl’s respective combining of Kantian transcendental idealism and Platonic ideals or essences points to one of several contextual elements that contribute to the philosophico-phenomenological emphasis of this study. The three major influences on Schopenhauer’s philosophy of art—Plato, Kant, and Asian philosophy and spirituality are acknowledged by him and by Schopenhauerian scholars. Still, Schopenhauer’s references to and uses of the philosophies of Plato and Kant are so interwoven that it is more accurate, at least at times, to explicate them as a single (albeit multi-faceted) topic.

While a student, Schopenhauer’s first philosophy professor, G.E. Schulze at the University of Göttingen, recommended that he study Plato and Kant, the two philosophers Schopenhauer came to regard as the greatest in the Western philosophical tradition (Cartwright 131). In *WWP I*, translator Aquila added subtitles to each section of the book, which are useful signposts pointing to key steps in Schopenhauer’s argument throughout the “Third Book” of *WWP I*. Thus in § 30, the translator subtitle “Levels of Objectification of Will as Platonic Ideas” (211) helps to

Explicating the Third Book requires a familiarity with the theme of Schopenhauer’s dissertation, *On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Ground: A Philosophical Treatise* (*Über die vierfache Wurzel des Satzes vom zureichenden Grunde: Eine philosphische Abhandlung*) (*WWP* I, 11). In the introduction to that book, Schopenhauer acknowledges some principles from Plato and Kant that he is using in his own argument:

The divine Plato and the marvelous Kant unite their firm and impressive voices in recommending a rule for the method of all philosophizing, indeed of knowledge in general. We should comply with two laws, they say, namely with those of *homogeneity* and *specification*; they should be equally observed, neither to the detriment of the other. The law of *homogeneity* tells us to start with kinds by observing the similarities and agreements in things, and also to unite these kinds into species, and these again into genera until we ultimately arrive at the highest concept that embraces everything (1).

Homogeneity and specification appear to be more of an organizational resource than an explicating principle. The Principle of Sufficient Ground, on the other hand, accounts for the appearance of individuals. However, in *WWP I*, Schopenhauer describes the world as an object for a subject and discusses how the will alone is beyond presentation, and that our cognizance of this fact leads to an
“objectivization of will, both in its entirety and in its parts” (211). Ideas, moreover, are not covered by The Principle of Sufficient Ground (212). Understanding what Schopenhauer means by individuation is key here. He refers to space and time as the *principium inviduationis*,\(^\text{139}\) or the principle of individuation. In Book One of *WWP I*, he considers presentation as it appears in time and space, whereas Book Three has another orientation—presentation as it appears independently of space and time, and this points to the significance of Schopenhauer’s use of the timeless Platonic Ideas (Wicks 82). Regarding the similarities between Platonic ideas and Kant’s thing-in-itself, the latter, Schopenhauer asserts, is an “obscure and paradoxical doctrine” that is “the weak side of his [Kant’s] philosophy” (212).

Schopenhauer notes that both Plato and Kant’s philosophies emphasize that the ordinary world, the world of objects in space and time, is not the true world (Wicks 83). Plato describes the true world as one of Ideas, while Kant calls it the thing-in-itself, a difference that allows Schopenhauer to delineate the two-fold nature of the Will—its permanent Platonic Ideas beyond space and time and the temporal and perishable thing-in-itself. According to Kant, no experience or insight is possible with the thing-in-itself; it is forever unknowable. Schopenhauer differs from Kant here, saying that an intuitive reception of the timeless dimension is possible (Wicks 84). In his explication of the Kantian thing-in-itself and the eternal Platonic Idea, Schopenhauer considers modes of cognition, and an enhanced presentation of Platonic ideas through art:

What mode of cognition, however, is concerned with that aspect of the world that is alone truly essential, standing beyond and independent of
all relation—the true content of its phenomena—that which is subject to no change and thus for all time cognized with equal truth, in a word: the Ideas that are the immediate and adequate objectivization of the thing-in-itself, of will? —It is art, the work of genius. It replicates the eternal Ideas that are apprehended through pure contemplation, that which is essential and enduring in all the world’s phenomena, and depending on the material in which it replicates them, it is plastic or pictorial art, poetry, or music. Its single origin is cognizance of Ideas, its single goal communication of this cognizance (*WWP I*, 228).

Schopenhauer goes on to note that unlike science, which is always moving towards “something else” without ever reaching an ultimate goal, “art, to the contrary, is always at its goal” (*WWP I*, 228). Although not every single concept within Schopenhauer’s thought will require explication in this chapter, some concepts do require some specific elucidation as to their Schopenhauerian meanings. One of his strongest contributions to western thought is that of the world as will (*Wille*).

**The Will (Der Wille)**

Aquila points out in the translator’s introduction in *WWP I* that for Schopenhauer *Der Wille* is what the world is in its innermost essence or “in itself” (*WWI* xxiv). While his work with the will is most elaborated and central to his work in *The World as Will and Presentation*, Schopenhauer also considered the role of the will earlier in *On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason*.

According to Schopenhauer, all knowledge inevitably presupposes subject and object. Thus self-consciousness is not absolutely simple, but, like our consciousness
of things (i.e., the faculty of intuitive perception), is divided into a known and a knower. Now here the known appears absolutely and exclusively as will:

Accordingly, the subject knows itself only as a willer, not as a knower.

For the ego that represents [presents], thus the subject of knowing, can itself never become representation [presentation] or object, since, as the necessary correlative of all representations [presentations], it is their condition. On the contrary, the fine passage from the sacred *Upanishad* applied: “It is not to be seen; it sees everything; it is not to be heard; it hears everything; it is not to be known: it knows everything; and it is not to be recognized: it recognizes everything.

Besides this seeing, knowing, hearing, and recognizing entity there is no other” (Schopenhauer, *Fourfold*, 208).¹⁴⁰

Thus in the present context, the “recognizing entity” Schopenhauer is describing is the invisible numinous being recognized via a sensibility to the numinous. In general, one can only have a sensibility to the numinous because of its ineffable, or mysterious quality. But there is far more to this if one travels completely down a Schopenhauerian path. The world to Schopenhauer is both will and presentation. The will is the *a posteriori* essence of the empirical world; thus in a basic Schopenhauerian sense, everything is will, including the thing-in-itself (*Ding-an-sich*). If there is a oneness or a prior unity to Schopenhauer’s thought, it is present as will in nature and in each person, but not in the sense of plurality; i.e., the will is not restricted to or within space and time, nor is it related to the *principium individuationis*, which is to say that the will is not related to individuation. In fact,
Schopenhauer describes the will as being free and transcendental, not having anything to do with presentation. Presentation to Schopenhauer is simply a reflection of the will. What additional vicissitudes of the will are utilized in Schopenhauer’s thought? He uses the phrases “affirmation of the will” (Die Bejahung des Willens) and “denial of the will” (Die Verneinung des Willens) to designate, in the former, how everything in the world is an objectification of the will, and thus an affirmation of the will. The affirmation of the will has also been referenced by Schopenhauer as the will to live (Wille zum Leben) (Cartwright 182). The most potent manifestation of the affirmation of the will is the sex drive, the urge to reproduce.

The denial of the will (Die Verneinung des Willens), on the other hand, is ultimately a positive phenomenon. Schopenhauer argued that cognition (Erkenntnis) is what is occurring within every living thing:

All animals, human and nonhuman, have nonrational cognitions of the external world, Schopenhauer argued, but only humans have the faculty of reason, and thus, he held that only humans have the capacity to have abstract representations [presentations] of concepts. Consequently he held that only humans are capable of rational, discursive thought while nonhuman animals are capable of only perception (Cartwright 28).

The denial of will expressed through cognition or intellectual awareness leads to a liberating kind of rebirth (Cartwright 183). This liberating dynamic is without a subject and object interplay, and it cannot be thought or known in the usual sense of
knowledge. However, one can have a sensibility to what Schopenhauer calls the denial of the will.

**The Central Conundrum**

Is Schopenhauer’s transition from the denial of the will to a liberating reorientation an example of a “belief” system because it is invulnerable to thought? This question points to more than a Schopenhauerian conundrum, which in fact does exist in that this question is, at least at times, the central conundrum of the entire study.

Again in Varo’s words, the intention herein is to communicate the incommunicable. But what does that mean? Besides being a puzzling statement connected to a pun, other wordplay, or paradox, a conundrum is, in this context, “Any puzzling question or problem; an enigmatical statement” (“conundrum, n.” 4.b.). In a philosophical context that is stressing the elucidation of concepts over language per se, how does one address an inherently contradictory concept or action wherein the invisible becomes visible or the logically nonsensical statement is made comprehensive?

In this study, the answer is simultaneously straightforward and complex. The conundrum is solved, answered and clarified through artistic work. “Art” is the primary answer in the present context. As already discussed in the two chapters on the numinous and the artistic seeking of the numinous, outside of new age declarations and theological approaches, artists have been society’s forward wave of seekers attempting to communicate the incommunicable. While this is not an exclusivity in the sense of art being the only means to investigate and communicate
knowledge, other activities like scientific research, behavioral psychology or psychoanalysis, study of language, and other activities, art does not require words, although in word and image studies, storytelling as literary art, and even various languages of storytelling themselves address that non-requirement. One needs to be aware that Borges, in fact, is a master—via his fabulist irrealism, of playing with words and language. In fact humor can always be heard, metaphorically speaking, rustling around and clearing its throat just outside the door in the work of both Borges and Varo.

This will be addressed in more detail in the next and final chapter on Varo and Borges as artist-philosophers. In the meantime, Schopenhauer argues that what one can be liberated from the suffering of the will and survivalist self-identification, as he emphasizes in a chapter of *WWP II* titled “On Death and Its Relation to Our Essence in Itself.” This is quoted at length because it gives a sense of this conundrum and what some readers may consider to be contradictory about Schopenhauer’s thought in regards to subjectivity and transcendence:

> During one’s lifetime a person’s will is without freedom: on the basis of his inalterable character, his action proceeds necessarily along the chain of motives. But now everyone carries within his memory a great number of things that he has done and with regard to which he is not satisfied with himself. If he then goes on living, he would, by virtue of the inalterability of character, also go on forevermore acting in the same manner. Accordingly, he must cease to be what he is, in order to be able to emerge from the seed of his essence as a new and different
being. Therefore death loosens those bonds: the will becomes free again, for freedom lies in esse, not in operari ['in being, not in doing']:  
Finitur nodus cordis, dissolvuntur omnes dubitationes, ejusque opera evanescunt ['The heart’s knot is cloven, all doubts are dissolved, its works pass away’: from the Mundaka-Upanishad 2,2,8] is a very famous saying of the Veda, which all followers of the Veda often repeat. Dying is the moment of that liberation from the one-sidedness of an individuality that does not constitute the inner most core of our essence, rather is to be thought of as a kind of aberration from it; true original freedom returns at this moment, which, in the sense that has been stated, can be regarded as a restitutio in integrum [“restoration to original condition” (expression from Roman law)] 
(WWP II, 567).

Reading this passage, one is also struck by Schopenhauer’s profoundly positive attraction to Indian spirituality. The liberating death described by Schopenhauer may simply seem like bodily extinction, but Schopenhauer places the phenomenon in a spiritual context, one that buffers or detoxifies the nihilist connotation that often surfaces with the topic. Nonetheless, a question also arises. Is there no way to be liberated from the will except through death? As mentioned previously, according to Schopenhauer there are two ways to transcend the bondage of the will while alive: asceticism and art. The latter is the one of primary significance in this study.
Schopenhauer’s Freedom from the Will in the Contemplation of Art

The contemplation of art is germane to Schopenhauer’s consideration of liberation from will, and the making and contemplating of art is a means in this study to use the hinge or disruption of wonder to access the numinous gate. In that circumstance, the invisible numinous becomes to some extent visible, and the incommunicable suddenly become communicable.

Arguing that the world is will and presentation, and that even the thing-in-itself is the will, and that consequently the world is a place of intense suffering and conflict and death because of the universal predominance of the will, Schopenhauer begins to examine subject-object presentations that are not affected by the principle of sufficient reason (Satz vom zureichenden Grund), which he proposed was not applicable to the thing-in-itself, but was a priori applicable to all the possible objects of cognition, which are presentations (Cartwright 138-139).

Art, the object of contemplation, remains as an apparently individual thing outside of time, but in the case of a work of art, it is “only that which is essential, the Idea, is an object for it” (WWP I, 228). Wicks notes that Plato’s Allegory of the Cave inspires Schopenhauer’s “aesthetics in general, and in particular, his understanding of aesthetic perception, artistic genius, and the nature of art” (90). Schopenhauer goes on to describe art as “that way of regarding things which is independent of the Principle of Sufficient Ground” (WWP I, 229). For Schopenhauer, since the Principle of Sufficient Ground is rational in character and helpful in practical life and science, “that which turns away from the Principle of Sufficient Ground is the genius’s way of regarding things, which is applicable and helpful only in art” (WWP I, 229). He
describes the essence of genius as a capacity for pure contemplation, “entirely absorbed in its object” (WWP I, 229). For Schopenhauer, only through the pure contemplation of the artistic genius are Ideas apprehended:

Accordingly, genius is the capacity for maintaining a purely perceptual state, for losing oneself in perception, and for withdrawing cognizance from service of the will that it existed originally but to serve, i.e., entirely losing sight of one’s interest, one’s willing, one’s purposes, and thus getting utterly outside one’s own personality for a time, so as to remain as purely cognizant subject, clear eye of the world (WWP I, 229).

Like Kant’s aesthetic methodology, Schopenhauer’s aesthetic stresses the subjective experience of art instead of the qualities of the object, but unlike Kant, Schopenhauer has the subject undergo an aesthetic experience of wonder, unknowing, and self-forgetting rather than a Kantian judgment.

Whether or not one completely agrees with Schopenhauer—and there are reasons to question his philosophy of art—in the present investigation the contemplation of art is an essential element, playing a role in all of its primary features: wonder, the numinous, and image consciousness. However, the element of artistic genius as a mandatory means to liberation through art is not necessarily valid. The contemplation of art is not restricted to the idea of genius in the present study. One does not have to be a genius to perceive, contemplate, meditate, enact, or create art, nor does one have to be a genius to experience wonder and a sensibility to the
numinous. In fact, the use of the word genius may itself be a presupposition that requires bracketing.

The earliest meaning of the word contemplation is a religious one, which the *Oxford English Dictionary* describes as “religious musing, devout meditation” ("contemplation, n."), an interesting and relevant factor when considering Schopenhauer and the numinous. Is Schopenhauer religious? He claims not.

**The Spiritual-Atheistic Root of Schopenhauer’s Aesthetic**

While Schopenhauer is often classified as an atheist by conventional definition, his thinking, referenced in the foregoing pages, is clearly related to certain theological and spiritual issues. Addressing some of the seemingly contradictory issues and points in Schopenhauer’s work can begin by considering how this thinker may well be described as a “spiritual-atheist.” While “spiritual-atheistic” is not a descriptive term Schopenhauer or any Schopenhauerian scholar has used, some scholars have noted the seemingly paradoxical orientation:

*Life is not worth living!* This is the thought most associated with German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, who was virtually unacknowledged when he died one hundred fifty years ago. Increasingly, however, we understand that behind the mask of a pessimist Schopenhauer was a Zen master and arguably the greatest mystic of the nineteenth century. Schopenhauer roused more than two thousand years of Western philosophy from its delusion about who we really are, by declaring that materiality—the life of the body, rather than the mind—was the driving force of existence (Schirmacher,
If the reader does acknowledge and at least momentarily accept a concept that combines the seemingly contradictory and admittedly rather amusing joining of antonyms—spiritual and atheist—much of the seemingly contradictory constitution of Schopenhauer’s thought becomes clarified. It is of paramount importance to understand that while Schopenhauer was anti-religious, he was not anti-spiritual. He did not believe in God or a god idea, or in some form of religious absolute, yet he did acknowledge, via his passion for Asian thought and spirituality, a reality greater than the individual that is clearly related to the Asian concept of a divine presence.

The notion of Schopenhauer as spiritual-atheist is accentuated and to some extent authenticated by the sense of wonder in Schopenhauer, and wonder does have, as already considered, a seminal role in the artistic process. This chapter ultimately considers Schopenhauer’s interest in the numinous to be more than a peripheral interest, one that is best elucidated in a more detailed consideration of how Hinduism and Buddhism parallel his philosophy. As evidenced by his emphatically positive interest in Asian thought, terms like intuition, ecstasy, epiphany, self-forgetting, self-transcendence, eternity, unity, and so on neither intimidated Schopenhauer nor defined his thinking. In actuality, what defined his thinking was how he applied to his western philosophy his Asian philosophy. It is well-known that original or traditional Asian philosophy is very often integrated with Asian spirituality.

**The Influence of Asian Philosophy and Spirituality on Schopenhauer’s Aesthetic**

After Plato and Kant, the third, and in some ways the strongest influence on
Schopenhauer’s thought was Hindu and Buddhist ideas. Schopenhauer’s interest in Eastern thought was not a unique phenomenon in early 19th Century Germany, but part of a larger “Oriental Renaissance” (Cross 9). Nonetheless, Schopenhauer was the first major Western philosopher to openly advocate and testify to the deep value of Indian thought:

It is a sobering thought that more than a century and a half after his death Arthur Schopenhauer remains, as Bryan Magee¹⁴³ has pointed out, the only major Western philosopher to have shown a serious and sustained interest in the thought of Asia and to have consistently sought to relate it to his own philosophical ideas; he goes much further in this direction than does Heidegger, for example (Cross xiii).

Cross also notes Schopenhauer’s criticisms of Christian translators of Indian texts misleading readers by using Christian diction like “soul and capitalized He in place of atman, God for Brahman, etc.” (Cross xiii). Repeatedly in WWP and other writings, Schopenhauer referenced Asian concepts and writings very positively, especially in, for example, his reading of the Upanishads, where he finds every line imbued with “firm, definite, and harmonious significance” (Parerga and Paralipomena 376). His interest in Indian thought was more than a hobby or passing fancy, as he explained in the preface to the first edition of WWP:

The philosophy of Kant, then, is the only one with which a thorough acquaintance is directly presupposed by that which is to be here expounded. If beyond this, however, the reader has lingered in the school of the divine Plato, he will be all the better prepared and the
more receptive to hearing me. But if he has even yet further shared in
the benefaction of the Vedas, access to which, opened up to us through
the Upanishads, is in my eyes the preeminent greatness that this still
young century has to show over earlier ones—in that I presume that
the influence of Sanskrit literature will be no less deep in its reach than
that of the revival of Greek literature in the 15th Century—if, I thus
assert, the reader has in fact already received and embraced
consecration from the ages-old Indian wisdom, then he is best of all
prepared to hear what I have to expound to him. It will then not speak
to him, as to many others, in foreign, indeed hostile terms. For, if it
does not sound too vain, I would maintain that every one of the
individual and disparate pronouncements that constitute the
Upanishads can be derived as a consequence from the thought to be
communicated by me, although in no way, conversely, is the latter
already to be found there (WWP I, 13).

What precisely stimulated such a positive orientation in a man whose
otherwise negative assessment of human life is so emphatic, or as some would argue,
an assessment of life that is exaggeratedly negative? How did the Schopenhauerian
rendering of the elements of art and Asian thought combine so comprehensively with
Kant, Plato, and Schopenhauer’s own theory of the will to form a unique force in
Continental philosophy, a force that continues even today to challenge the
presuppositions and exclusivities of Eurocentric thought? Several elements in
Schopenhauer’s philosophy of art were in some respects at least as related to his study
of Asian philosophy as to the foundation influence of Plato, Kant and Occidental philosophy in general.

**Schopenhauer’s Optimism as Rooted in Asian Spirituality**

Themes and concepts such as wonder, aesthetic contemplation, self-transcendence, intense feeling (*Gefühl*) and intuitive (*intuitiv*) cognizance while not by any means exclusively Asian nonetheless are very directly acknowledged and studied in generous detail in Hindu, Buddhist, and other Asian aesthetics. That a vibrant optimism is operative in Schopenhauer’s philosophy is especially evident in his relationship with Asian thought has been less acknowledged in Continental philosophy than it might have been, not just because of the Eurocentric nature per se of western thought, but perhaps for other biases only reflected by Eurocentrism. Ideas that address the limitations of scientific materialism or that emphasize the key importance of wonder and the numinous or more often addressed by Asian thought and practices than by European ideas. Also, one must push past the arbitrary label of pessimism to appreciate the depth and originality of Schopenhauer’s work:

If optimism and pessimism were the stuff of temperament only, they would have no place in the tenets of a noble philosophy. A philosophical system must be more than a hypostasis of wishful thinking, or a rationalized frustration. And the *argumentum ad hominem* applied as a serious charge against a philosophical doctrine would be amusingly irrelevant if it were not superlatively misleading. Refutations must be made of firmer stuff. Thus that late nineteenth century critique of Schopenhauer—an approach still unfortunately
sometimes practiced—that seeks to trace the source of his ideas top
alleged strains of pathological melancholia and emotional obsession in
himself and his ancestry, amounts in fine to a simple case of gossip-
logic (Muses 19).

Muses’s small volume *East—West Fire: Schopenhauer’s Optimism and the*
*Lankavatara Sutra* identifies, clarifies, and compares numerous parallels between *The*
*Lankavatara Sutra*, a seminal text in Mahayana Buddhism, and various aspects of
Schopenhauer’s writings. This is all the more interesting in that while Schopenhauer
did read the *Vedas*, and especially the part of the *Vedas* known as *The Upanishads*, as
well as some Buddhist texts, he “never read the *Lankavatara* or any other of the great
Mahayana scriptures; for they, together with the entire Canon they represent, have
enjoyed only a relative recency of authentic knowledge in the Western acquirement of
learning” (21).

In other words, Schopenhauer read the Asian literature that was available in
his lifetime. Muses does acknowledge that one could also find parallels between
Schopenhauer’s thought and the Asian texts that he did read, but that some of the
confluences between the powerful *Lankavatara Sutra* and Schopenhauer’s philosophy
do reveal places where Schopenhauer’s native optimism does in fact surface. For
example, the core of *The Lankavatara Sutra* is its teaching of a “two-fold
egolessness,” or the truth behind world-illusion described traditionally as the veil of
Maya. According to Muses, illusion is an error in perception, whereas delusion is a
belief in the validity of that illusion (Muses 23-25). In the concept of two-fold
egolessness, no entity is actually separate from other entities. First, the self-nature of
a conscious entity is not truly separate from the self-nature of all other conscious entities; likewise, the self-nature of an object or group of objects is not separate from the self-nature of all other objects because “all meanings and indeed all activities [are] springing from the interrelations of all things” (Muses 25). That the two-fold egolessness in *The Lankavatara Sutra* corresponds to Schopenhauer’s world as presentation and world as will opens a consideration of related aesthetic and metaphysical themes—whether the emphasis is Western, Eastern or both.

It cannot be emphasized enough that for Schopenhauer, the challenge to linear or discursive knowledge comes from a source he considered authentic, one that has been and continues to be an inspiration to artists—Asian thought and aesthetics.

The art theories of many modern artists have been influenced by both Asian and Schopenhauerian thought. John Cage, for example, was influenced not only by Zen Buddhism, but also by Schopenhauer, whom Cage read with genuine interest.

Once it is understood that a primary element in the Schopenhauerian aesthetic is the contemplation of art, it is then necessary to examine some of the Schopenhauerian concepts related to that contemplation.

**Wonder [thauma], Quotidian, tat tvam asi, the Sky, the Circle**

The possibilities inherent in wonder and the absence of expectation deserve to be considered and explored in more detail. It can be argued that the experience and phenomenon of wonder is not restricted to a set of parameters or locked inside a system of circumstances. Music alone challenges these restrictions, not to mention many other phenomena. As noted in the earlier quote by Cartwright about Schopenhauer’s need for metaphysics, “He attributed this need to a sense of wonder
or astonishment, one that arises from the recognition of the ubiquity of suffering and death within the world” (145). The seminal element informing Schopenhauer’s aesthetic is a sense of wonder, which is also a phenomenon that straddles Eastern and Occidental aesthetics. Furthermore, inherent in Asian aesthetics is a broader reach that more directly and openly allows for the possibility of a sensibility to the numinous in art and life in general.

Before labeling any experience or phenomenon as an occurrence of wonder, the numinous, the sublime, or any other name, there is the nameless experience or phenomenon itself. Neither spiritual nor philosophical understanding should rotely depend on categories or names. Not-knowing or unknowing is not a form of stupidity, nor a lack of intelligence or understanding. What is referred to metaphorically as the gateless gate in Zen Buddhism, for example, or any other authentic form of esoteric spirituality, does not require verbal labeling before being experienced. In this sense, language is more like a street map for navigation through life rather than an entire (ontological) city in itself. Even though language is an aspect of being, it is also a means to describe non-linguistic being, a means that can obviously influence to some extent ontological perception. Even though an absence of verbal or textual description or language can occur, to assert that language is inconsequential or irrelevant would be erroneous. On the contrary, language, as many thinkers have asserted, is very relevant to philosophical understanding. Virtually every philosopher has worked with language, including Plato, through the Socratic dialogues, although modern and contemporary thinkers have clearly worked far more extensively with language. Indeed, Russian literary theorist Mikel Bakhtin’s brilliant work with
language is utilized ahead. Also, as has been noted earlier, the Husserlian epochē and “back to the things themselves” (*Wir wollen auf die ‘Sachen selbst’ zurückgehen*) are part of a methodology that navigates through secondary aspects of phenomenon, including the presuppositions of language.

After Sophia Vasalou says, “Schopenhauer’s philosophical wonder forms an illuminating category through which to calibrate the way we read his philosophy” (Vasalou, *Schopenhauer* 3), she goes on to argue, “Schopenhauer’s own analysis of the sublime” combines with “a therapeutic of wonder at its heart—a therapeutic of the passions that is simultaneously a therapeutic of the subjectivity that underpins them” (*Schopenhauer* 5). The present argument is that when Schopenhauer’s aesthetic emphasizes the liberating dynamic of contemplating art, a dynamic that generates self-forgetting and freedom from the devastating drive of the will, his aesthetic is—through the contemplation of art—rooted in a sense of wonder that is, at least in some case, caused by art. By its nature as a phenomenon universal to human consciousness, the sense of wonder is restricted neither to European nor Asian experience. Schopenhauer’s sense of wonder is enhanced and magnified for him via the influence of and reference to Indian philosophy, but also through the influence of Platonic Ideas on his thought.

What are the elements within the phenomenon of wonder that connect Schopenhauer with Indian philosophy and spirituality that are relevant to the current investigation? A primary element surfaces in Schopenhauer’s acknowledgement of overcoming individuation through the contemplation of art, which he articulates,
while discussing the many forms of nature, by borrowing a well-known Sanskrit term:

But were we to communicate for the sake of the observer’s reflection, and in a single word, an insight into that nature’s inner essence, then we could best employ for that purpose the Sanskrit formula that appears so often in the holy books of the Hindus and is called *Mahavakya*, i.e., great word: *Tat twam asi*. Which means: “This living thing is you” (WWPI 266).

When Schopenhauer is discussing aesthetics, he references either art and nature, or both, while considering simultaneously the role of Platonic Ideas and how overcoming individuation might occur. As one scholar describes it:

This special attitude of our consciousness, which Schopenhauer calls “aesthetic contemplation,” is the most important factor in seeing through the *principium individuationis*, the knowledge of the Ideas as the essence of the phenomena, or, at last, the deeper insight into the thing-in-itself, the will-to-live as the common ground of all beings.

The objective contemplation of works of art, of vegetative forms or of animalistic behavior and actions allows us to forget our individuality and its limited and dissociative harmful character. We see instead “the manifold grades and modes of manifestation of the will that is one and the same in all beings,” and reflecting this experience, we recognize the will-to-living as our common inner nature, essentially beyond any
individuation. The condensed version of this insight is the *tat tvam asi* (Ruffing 99).

While remaining within a contextual sphere of artistic knowledge, what in Schopenhauerian terms underlies a spontaneous and positive sense of transcending separative self-identification through a sense of wonder? Platonic Ideas are key here:

If the subject is to perceive Platonic Ideas which exist outside space, time and causality and which, therefore, are not individuals, the subject must forget about his or her individuality and, in the process of perceiving the extraordinary, must not have any self-awareness as a person of our common world. To achieve this, the subject must undergo a change which deeply alters the whole mode of perception (Pothast 34).

In the interest of relating this to ordinary human existence, this might also simply be called self-forgetting, which is something everyone experiences in some moments, as when driving somewhere or being absorbed in some activity or other person or object. An aspect of the argument here is that self-forgetting occurs temporarily in a moment of wonder in both art-making and art-viewing. The details of this experience are more phenomenological in nature than metaphysical. Schopenhauer notes that, first, “these worlds exist only in a presentation to us, only as modifications of the eternal subject of pure cognition that we find ourselves to be as soon as we forget individuality” (251), which essentially serves to refine a metaphysical orientation by acknowledging the phenomenological point of presentation. Secondly, Schopenhauer uses a non-Eurocentric reference to elucidate
his assertions:

All of this does not enter reflection at once, however, but shows itself as a merely felt consciousness that we are in some sense (which philosophy alone explicates) one with the world and thus not crushed, but lifted, by its immensity. It is the felt consciousness of that which *Upanishads* of the *Vedas* repeatedly pronounce in such manifold variations, particularly in the passage already quoted: *Hae omnes creaturae in totum ego sum, et praeter me aliud ens non est* [“All these creatures together am I, and beyond me no beings exists.”] (251).146

**Music**

Another major art theory confluence, a kind of aesthetic intertextuality, occurred with both Schopenhauer and Kandinsky—the importance of music. Kandinsky’s emphasis on music is well-documented,147 and for Schopenhauer, music was the supreme pure form of art, one that is independent of the phenomenal world, because it bypasses Ideas and stands uniquely on its own:

And since our world is nothing other than the phenomenon of Ideas in the form of multiplicity, by means of their entry into the *principium individuationis* (the form belonging to the sort of cognition possible for individuals as such), it follows that music, since it bypasses Ideas, is also entirely independent of the phenomenal world, completely ignores it, could even to a certain extent exist if the world were not there. This cannot be said of the other arts. In other words, music is just as immediate an objectivization and image of will as a whole as
the world itself is, indeed just as much as the Ideas whose multiplied phenomenon constitutes the world of individual things. Thus music is in no way, like the other arts, an image of Ideas, but an image of the very will of which Ideas are also the objectivization. Just for this reason, the effect of music is so very much more powerful and penetrating than that of the other arts. For the latter speak only of shadows; it, rather, speaks of the essence of things (WWPI 307-308).

That Kandinsky and Schopenhauer both emphasized the primary significance of music points to the role of intense emotion—Gefühl. As discussed previously, Rudolf Otto’s referencing of Gefühl as a feeling more intense and penetrating than ordinary emotional expressions also can be understood as one factor that can enhance a sensibility to the numinous, one that occurs prior to conceptual thought. Earlier than Otto, Schopenhauer also considered the significance of Gefühl, albeit in a far more complicated way, and generally in relation to music. Schopenhauer argued that music was not concerned with ordinary emotions. These emotions were considered to be phenomena, “but Schopenhauer asserted that music contained the inner nature of these phenomena, the feelings or emotions themselves as aspects of the will” (Hall 167-168). For Schopenhauer, that inner nature is not available through rational knowledge (Wissen) but “through Erkenntnis, a kind of knowledge suffused with emotion or feeling (Gefühl).

There are some points of Schopenhauer’s argument that can be challenged, especially in relation to visual art and the phenomenon of the world. That he presents music as the most uniquely powerful of the arts, and the only art that directly
communicates an essence (to Schopenhauer, a direct communication of the will) rather than, like the other arts, a mere reflection of Ideas) remains debatable. In particular, Schopenhauer does not take into account thoroughly enough are the forms and complexities of subjectivity in regards to art, especially in regards to narrative or storytelling, and specifically in the present case, irrealism and fabulism. Consequently, it is useful to call on some of the concepts of another thinker to better clarify and consider the art of Varo and Borges.

**Bakhtin**

Mikhail Bakhtin is best known for his literary theory, which presents his rendering of aesthetic ideas (the majority of them rooted in his original concepts), including dialogism, polyphony, polyglossia, theoretism, answerability, outsideness, intertextuality, heteroglossia, chronotope, finalizability and unfinalizability, carnivalesque and grotesque realism. While not all of these Bakhtinian concepts are relevant to this study, some are referenced in the next chapter. Some central points that makes Bakhtin’s theories relevant are his emphasis on the human beings and his avoidance of a complete system of artistic theory:

Unlike some of his contemporaries such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Henri Bergson, Bakhtin’s goal was not to create a moral or philosophical system. Most of his essays are predicated on the presupposition that the human being is the centre around which all action in the real world, including art, is organized. In his writing, the “I” and the “other” are the fundamental categories of value that make
all action and creativity possible, as in the work of Marin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas (Haynes, *Bakhtin Reframed*, 5).

In her discussion of Bakhtin’s aesthetics in *Bakhtin Reframed*, Deborah Haynes describes Bakhtin’s orientation to art for life’s sake, not art for art’s sake (12-13). To say art is for art’s sake was to Bakhtin an error that signaled a crisis for modern artists and writers. Even though, as already quoted above, Haynes asserted that Bakhtin did not set out to create a moral system, she also subsequently emphasizes, “At its foundation, Bakhtinian aesthetics is profoundly moral and religious. In fact, Bakhtin’s early aesthetic essays derived many of the terms from theology” (13). Haynes adds, “Bakhtin reputedly said that aesthetics is similar to religion inasmuch as both help to transfigure life” (13).\(^{150}\)

Nor is a spiritual impulse absent in the writings of Western philosophers discussed here. Although Husserl is not as anti-religious as Schopenhauer, and at times authenticates while simultaneously disavowing the influence of phenomenological theology in his work,\(^{151}\) there can be no denying that Husserl was a religious person.\(^{152}\) Husserl simply brackets out that aspect of his own life and beliefs within his writings about transcendental phenomenology.

Schopenhauer’s orientation is not theological per se, but primarily a metaphysical and aesthetic one. Nonetheless, even though Schopenhauer was antagonistic towards religion, the fact of his recognition and use of topics such as the sublime and beauty, artistic and spiritual freedom, Eastern spirituality and aesthetics, and the transcendence of human suffering through the self-forgetting contemplation of art does represent altogether a sensibility to the numinous.
Chapter Six—Art as Life: Varo and Borges as Artist-Philosophers

Extending some of the philosophical topics from the previous chapters to apply to this final chapter about the artist-philosopher dynamic discloses some philosophical aspects of the art of Varo and Borges. While a Husserlian phenomenological methodology provides a primary means or infrastructure for examining the work of Borges and Varo, additional and multifarious means are utilized briefly at times to explore the unorthodox work of these two accomplished and idiosyncratic artist-philosophers. For example, Schopenhauerian, Platonic, Kantian, Bakhtinian, Bataillean and other multifarious philosophical concepts—or explicatory points used for elucidating certain concepts—are succinctly referenced and offered as additional means. This chapter looks at some themes common to both Borges and Varo, then separately examines in more detail the work of each of these two artists. First, a distilled and succinctly stated description of the artist-philosopher dynamic is required, albeit difficult.

The Artist-Philosopher Dynamic

Why describe this phenomenon as a “dynamic” and why is it difficult to define? Although farther ahead it is also accurately described as an “agency,” to describe the artist-philosopher as a dynamic is accurate, given the reciprocally amalgamating process underlying that dynamic. That the artist-philosopher phenomenon is a dynamic, or the opposite of static or inactive, seems obvious—a primary characteristic is its continually shifting activities and its functional, accomplishing nature. It is a unique dynamic of making and thinking, or vice versa,
and not infrequently it is an expression of the simultaneity of making and thinking.\textsuperscript{153}

That an artist makes things and a philosopher thinks about everything seems at first glance to be a valid (albeit over-simplified) statement. At the same time, using words like “things” and “everything” reflects a generality that in itself yields an overview of interwoven elements of philosophy and art. In that regard, one might argue that every human being has some characteristics of both an artist and a philosopher. When someone is primarily a working artist, that fact is often unambiguously obvious. Likewise, if an individual’s character reflects a strong philosophical bent, in an artistic context or not, that aspect of their character is usually recognizable and acknowledgeable through the person’s communications and actions.\textsuperscript{154} To say that the actions of an artist-philosopher attest to a process in which the artist addresses philosophical questions and creates answers through making his or her art is both too diffused and too adamantine. A working artist is already engaging an artistic process that generates a wide variety of inquiries, challenges, thoughts and responses, even if the artist is the only person who witnesses the details of that process. A fixed definition of the artist-philosopher remains challenging because of evolving stages and the non-fixed or plastic and shifting directions of both artistic and philosophical work.

Thus, since the phrase “artist-philosopher” is self-descriptive in a rudimentary sense, why can a simple description not suffice? If by simple one means universally concrete, the dilemmas and obstacles begin to surface. Why these challenges appear is obvious—the creative process itself is a highly individualistic, which is to say a highly subjective, dynamic, even if initiated through another artist’s or thinker’s
work. This point is not to assert that artists cannot collaborate, as can be seen in work of Gilbert & George, Picasso and Braque, Jake and Dinos Chapman, Robert Mapplethorpe and Louise Bourgeois, Björk and Matthew Barney, Man Ray and Lee Miller, and countless other pairings, as well as group artistic efforts. Collaborations, however, must nonetheless find ways to process individual aesthetic orientations and inspirations because every established artist who is not strictly a student or disciple artist presumes and calls upon an individualistic subjective artistic process, even though, as we have already considered, subjectivity involves more than a common presumption of utilizing a separative self-identified *modus operandi*. Art especially demonstrates this because of inherent cultural and societal influences such as art historical and sociopolitical factors, as well as marketing issues. The idealistic ivory tower orientation to artistic endeavors is no longer (and to some extent probably never was) an accurate description of the creative process, even if an artist or writer may work alone much of the time.

That seemingly solitary effort is never truly solitary, except perhaps in a physical sense. While working alone implies (if there is not a literal collaboration) the efforts of a single individual at work, that is not exactly so because even then one works with memories of and sensibilities to the other. Almost any formal and honest statement of one’s own work should generously acknowledge the resources or support of other people, or at least the influences of other people’s work.

An elementary sense of Husserlian intersubjectivity seems key here, as does intertextuality, be it a scholarly textual or artistically visual orientation. And as will be presented shortly, an inevitable Bakhtinian polyphonic dialogism could be said to
underlie what appears to be a solitary action. Thus, while solitude as well as loneliness are experiences generally understood by everyone, it remains questionable if “aloneness” is completely accurate given the myriad forms of relationship characteristic of humankind.

Nonetheless, there exists, when one begins, the blank page or empty canvas, the bare stage or the mere thought of a creative project. Both Varo and Borges communicate a sense of this artistic aloneness, yet paradoxically neither artist fails, in her or his art, to challenge the validity of that expression. In fact, one could argue that it is through the philosophical component accessed by each artist that the sense of existential solitude, positive or negative, is fractured.

For example, while Varo’s painting *Revelation or The Clockmaker* (figs.32-33) and her comments about it emphasize an instance of a temporal theme, complete with various visual themes Varo used repeatedly in her paintings such as the cat, a window, and a person working at a table or desk. This painting also reflects how Varo demonstrates a fractured or multiple sense of self. When Varo comments on this painting in her wonderfully modest and plain-spoken style, she notes how each timepiece contain “a figure from very distant epochs,” although she could easily and just as accurately described each of those figures as a version of herself, or a version of the central seated figure. Although the artist verbally magnifies the sense of distinctive epochs, noting how she used period costumes, there remains in fact a visual sense, when one simply looks at the painting, of those figures expressing the multiplicity of self:
This painting is about time. That’s why there is a clockmaker (who in a sense, represents our ordinary time), but through the window comes a revelation and all of a sudden the clockmaker comprehends a whole lot of things. I have tried to make him look both astonished and enlightened. He is surrounded by a series of timepieces all showing the same time, but containing a figure from very distant epochs. I achieve this effect through different period costumes. Each clock has a window with bars, like a prison (Ovalle 111).
Fig. 33. Remedios Varo. Detail from *Revelation or The Clockmaker* (*Revelación o El relojero*) 1955. Oil on Masonite. 27 7/8 x 33 in. Private Collection.

[Aquí se trata del tiempo. Por eso hay un relojero (que en cierta manera representa el tiempo ordinario nuestro), pero por la ventana entra una “revelación” y comprende de golpe muchísimas cosas; he
tratado de darle una expresión de asombro y de iluminación. A su alrededor hay cantidad de relojes que marcan todos la misma hora, pero dentro de cada uno hay el mismo personaje en muy diferentes épocas; eso lo consigo por medio de los trajes característicos de épocas muy distintas, cada reloj tiene una ventana con rejas como en una cácel. (Ovalle 111).

The Artist-Philosopher Dynamic as Agency

The artist-philosopher dynamic serves as agency for taking action in the world and addressing humankind beyond the limitation of separative self-identification. Thinking of the artist-philosopher as agency provides a clearer view of the artist-philosopher dynamic underlying such an agency. What, then, is agency? While the most common definition is “a person or organization acting on behalf of another, or providing a particular service” (“agency, n.,” I.), a related definition is “action or intervention producing a particular effect” (“agency, n.,” II,5,a.), and more specifically, “a being or thing that acts to produce a particular effect or result” (“agency, n.,” II,5,b.). In this last description, it is not simply the artistic component that is called into action to produce a particular affect. By asserting that Borges and Varo are artist-philosophers, what must be asked is how the philosophical component is revealed in their work—how does their work become (for each artist-philosopher) agency?

The Artist-Philosopher Dynamic as Agency in Borges and Varo

Both Varo and Borges emphasize the nonlinear plasticity and ephemeral qualities of “facts” in their respective bodies of work; they continually challenge the
presumed concreteness of factual knowledge. To unearth some of the artistic artifacts Borges and Varo left in the wake of their irrealistic journeys, and to look at some of the philosophical ideas pervading their creative processes and art, requires a Husserlian bracketing out of presumptions not only about what reality is, but what philosophical discourse is presumed to be. Borges’s writings, including his non-fictional essays, fictional stories, and poetry, attest to the consistent, sinewy philosophical quality of his work. The thematic range of Varo’s paintings, on the other hand, seem at first appearance to be merely about the occult and other strange or bizarre themes, but that are nonetheless recognizable representational phenomena. The numinous sensibility in her simultaneously robust and fastidious work actually covers a broad philosophical landscape, even if one must sometimes penetrate her outwardly playful interest in the magical and the occult to recognize her meaningful philosophical orientation. If one looks at the painting previously considered, Revelation or The Clockmaker (figs.32-33), the inherent issues such as the temporal-spatial theme, intersubjectivity, metaphorical means that signal ontological significance, symbolism, and other philosophical topics do surface.

When someone is a working artist with a pronounced philosophical orientation, the artist-philosopher appears, and that confluence and reciprocal assimilation between thinking and making can be quite complex, as it is with both Borges and Varo, whose literary and visual artistic compositions are philosophically proposed and artistically composed or constructed through their irrealistic fabulist art.

Both Borges and Varo address issues and topics such as the nature of existence and reality, time and space, subjectivity and the other, search and journey,
wonder and the numinous. While in a broad sense all artists have a philosophical strand woven into their creative processes, one that may or may not be evident in the art they make because some are more emphatically and recognizably philosophical than others. In spite of this, some artist-philosophers do not claim to be known as philosophers, and this is the case with both Borges and Varo. When a given artist disclaims philosophical intentions, even if the philosophical component is clearly evident, that artist’s denial may be a response to his or her work being described as philosophical, a description the artist may not seek or desire. And yet the philosophical seriousness behind the playfulness of each of these artists repeatedly surfaces.

Fig. 34. Remedios Varo, 1958. Fotografía tomada del catálogo razonado publicado por Era por Kati Horna.

Fig. 35. Jorge Luis Borges. 1968 Central Park, New York City. by Diane Arbus.

Applying Husserlian Transcendental Phenomenology to Varo and Borges
At this point it is useful consider more explicitly how Husserlian methodology in a philosophy of art context can be applied to Borges and Varo. We might begin by noting that givenness (Gegebenheit) becomes relevant when examining an artist’s creative process. Givenness in Husserlian terms is essential to understanding experience as an experience of something, the object appearing (being given in appearance) and experienced (received), at which point the subject, actually either the artist or the viewer, is perceiving the object that is given in appearance. There are multifarious influential elements, depending on the form of consciousness being experienced, that enter into Husserlian givenness. Remedios Varo’s consciously and subconsciously fueled visions of art, for example, make visible a process already aligned with some of the principles of Husserlian phenomenology.

As can be seen, the distinction between image consciousness (Bildbewuβteil) or “depicting consciousness”) (Moran and Cohen 158-159) and perception serves the explication of both Varo and Borges’s creative processes. When explicating phantasy\textsuperscript{155} presentation as pictorialization, Husserl’s observations might be applied to Varo’s visualization or irreal creativity as it could be done with other artists\textsuperscript{156} who might also be considered as creating forms of fantasy:

We characterized perception as an act in which something objective appears to us in its own person, as it were, as present itself. In phantasy, to be sure, the object itself appears (insofar as it is precisely the object that appears there) but it does not appear as present. It is only re-presented; it is though it were there, but only as though. It appears to us in image. The Latins say imaginatio. Phantasy
presentation seems to presuppose or claim for itself a new
characteristic of apprehension; it is pictorialization (Husserl, Phantasy, 18). 157

Husserl’s phrase “re-presented” is a key to understanding how a non-physical
object can be presented or given in phenomenological terms. As proposed in this
study, Borges and Varo repeatedly re-present their work via fabulist irrealism, or
irreal fabulism. 158 Irreal fabulism is explicated ahead in more detail and depth.

Along these lines, and as presented in more detail ahead, a thematic literary
strand that accentuates consciousness in Borges’s storytelling surfaces when his
attraction to numinous sensibility becomes the expressive element of his aesthetic.
When that expressive element becomes interwoven with the receptive element of his
aesthetic, albeit in his uniquely presented Borgesian intertextual fashion, the irreal
fabulist search for a numinous gateway surfaces more visibly, albeit in a literary
rendering.

Husserlian intentionality, as noted earlier, does not indicate the common
meaning of intending to do something as in a volitional usage, but instead is
essentially about aiming the experience of attention towards an object and receiving
(in Husserlian terms intuiting) that object. Thus one might say intentionality is the
directedness of the conscious state. Directedness of the conscious state is a key
understanding of phenomenological intentionality.

When Husserlian intuition is activated it becomes the act of incorporating or
“having” or receiving of the object that appears in consciousness, even if that object
is, as in a Varo painting, an imaginary (in Husserlian terms “phantastic”) object. This
is the artistic imagination at work within a Husserlian phenomenological infrastructure of methodology. Husserl repeatedly described how imagination is a re-presentation of an object.

If the presentation or re-presentation is the *givenness* of an object in consciousness, then the *intentionality* (directedness) of the artist or viewer of receiving the object in consciousness becomes, when completed, an intuition (or reception) of the object. What can be misleading is how this phenomenological process cannot accurately be described as a linear process. While there seems to be a give and take process indicating a linear sequence, that linearity does not exist (except perhaps in a mischievous or playful way for Borges and Varo) because givenness of the art object and the creative expression of the artist seem to occur, or at the very least can occur, simultaneously. The creative dynamic between subjectivity and art could be seen as seamless and indefinable, except that in this case (and undoubtedly in many instances) the relationship between consciousness and subjectivity, or consciousness and selfhood, is complex and in some respects nebulous in both Varo and Borges. “In his earliest essays, such as ‘The Nothingness of Personality,’ Borges challenged the notion of the self, and a continuing desire to do so runs through much of his writing” (Griffin 7). This essay presents a proposal of intention (not phenomenological intentionality, but more like the volitional usage of intending to do something) in the author:

Intention. I want to tear down the exceptional preeminence now generally awarded to the self, and I pledge to be spurred on by concrete certainty, and not the caprice of an ideological ambush or a
dazzling intellectual prank. I propose to prove that personality is a mirage maintained by conceit and custom, without metaphysical foundation or visceral reality. I want to apply to literature the consequences that issue from these premises, and erect upon them an aesthetic hostile to the psychologism inherited from the last century, sympathetic to the classics, yet encouraging to today’s most unruly tendencies (Selected Non-fictions 3).

Borges’s desire stated above to “tear down the exceptional preeminence now generally awarded to the self” brings another experience into view, one that surfaces repeatedly in this investigation, though not directly addressed by Husserl.

If Husserlian intuitions are perceptions or modifications of perception, and intuition indicates a “location” where an intentional object is directly present via that intentionality, when an intention is “filled” by the apprehension of an object, that object is intuited. While the appearance of the object is “given” and Borges’s reception of the given object, for example, will be as real or irreal as the author decides it should be, that object—be it the Library of Babel, the Circular Ruins, the Aleph, a Dreamtiger, a Garden of Forking Paths, or Hakim, the Masked Dyer of Merv—remains a key element in his creative dynamic. His intentionality to render the numinous visible via layers of irreal and intertextual narrative represents a form of direct apprehension in which a given object fulfills intentionality as an intuition of the object. The fantasy aspect of Varo’s creative process reveals how intentionality and apprehension yield an intuition of immediate structure as evidence of life in art,
which also echoes Michel Henry’s argument of material phenomenology and interiority as invisible life.

**Henry Applies Husserlian Elements to a Study of Invisibility and Kandinsky**

Mentioning Michel Henry’s work generates a series of brief interjections, beginning with Henry’s use of Husserlian phenomenology in his explication of Kandinsky’s work, that serve as supportive or secondary materials. Henry’s 2005 *Seeing the Invisible: On Kandinsky* (published in English in 2009) is a preeminent philosophico-phenomenological study of Kandinsky’s aesthetic, some of which is relevant here. Henry discusses at length, for example, the implications and meanings of invisibility in non-objective abstract art. For instance, Henry does not hesitate to apply Husserl’s epochē to Kandinsky’s work:

[Kandinsky] showed how by separating a letter or sign from its linguistic meaning or any other context in which it usually occurs one could again experience its “pure form,” its “purely pictorial” form. But once the world and all its meanings have been set aside, once its logos, which has always been that which is spoken by men, has been silenced, what exactly is left? According to Husserl and those artists who gave up realism, we are left with the sensate appearances to which the true, given world is reduced, the pure experience of the world (377).

While this is an original explication of how to apply epochē to abstract art, it is also, if extended, applicable to a sensibility to the numinous in Varo and Borges’s art. For instance, when Henry is discussing the theory of elements in Kandinsky’s
work, and specifically commenting on Kandinsky’s *Point and Line to Plane* and the positive aspects of studying and analyzing the artistic picture plane, Henry writes:

This derives from the fact that it is an essential analysis, in the phenomenological sense that Husserl gives the term, leading us to the essence of the thing, pertaining here to the pure pictorial elements. The essence of the pictorial element is the abstract content, the invisible life that this element seeks to express (33).

One might understandably ask what this has to do with Varo and Borges, since their art is not nonobjective abstraction but irrealist fabulism. However, a connection in a sensibility to the invisibility of the numinous can occur by any artist or the viewer or reader (and the reader is a kind of viewer via imagination). While writing about Kandinsky’s intense emotion in response to viewing but not really seeing or recognizing Monet’s haystacks at an 1896 Moscow exhibition, Henry writes:

He joined the lesson from it with the one that he drew from reading Niels Bohr: physical reality has no substance and in some way no reality; quanta of energy move in leaps without crossing through it. In physics as well, matter is broken down in to the dust of dubious, virtual particles; it dissolves into reality and a sort of immaterialism (15).

In Husserlian givenness, or the appearance itself, multifarious influential elements are possible, depending on the form of consciousness being experienced. This includes forms of the irreal.
Fabulism, Irrealism and Fantasy

In proposing that Varo and Borges are modern fabulist artist-philosophers, and that fabulism allows wonder to fuel some aspects of their creative processes, fabulist storytelling needs to be explicated. Part of that explication is to consider “irrealism” as contrasted with “magic realism” and “fantasy,” terms sometimes assigned to these artists’ work. In general, one of the most salient descriptive aspects of the term “magic realism” is its oxymoronic quality, contrasting realism, or what is “real,” with “magic,” which is understood not to be real in the usual sense of reality. The term “magic realism” first appeared in 1920’s Germany. In his 1925 book Nach-Expressionismus, Magischer Realismus: Probleme der neuesten europäischen Malerei (Post-Expressionism, Magic Realism: Problems of the Most Recent European Painting), art critic Franz Roh “coined the term that is translated as ‘magic realism’ to define a form of painting that differs greatly from its processor (expressionist art) in its attention to accurate detail, a smoother photograph-like clarity of picture and the representation of the mystical non-material aspects of reality” (Bowers 8-9).

While Remedios Varo was not part of the so-called Neue Sachlichkeit art movement, Bowers description above also serves as a general description of Remedios Varo’s uniquely accomplished representational paintings about magic, mysticism, and mystery. The formal definition of magic realism under “art and literary theory” in the Oxford English Dictionary, includes: “In extended use: any artistic or esp. literary style in which realistic techniques such as naturalistic detail, narrative, etc., are similarly combined with surreal or dreamlike elements” (“Magic realism”). This term has been referenced primarily to describe “the narrative mode
that offers “a way to discuss alternative approaches to reality to that of Western Philosophy, expressed in many postcolonial and non-Western works of contemporary fiction by, most famously, writers such as Gabriel García Márquez and Salman Rushdie” (Bowers 1). Magic realism also brings to mind writers like Julio Cortázar, Franz Kafka, Günter Grass, John Fowles, Isabel Allende, Angela Carter, Alejo Carpentier, and Arturo Uslar-Pietri, among many others. Beyond generalization, however, magic realism has various usages (Bowers 1-7).

The term “magic realism” is referenced here infrequently, however, because the present focus is on philosophical, phenomenological, and aesthetic investigations as related to fabulist storytelling rather than a deconstruction of literary or artistic categories. To reiterate, this study examines the work of two artists who worked with irrealistic fabulist art, which, although containing elements of magical realism, is not magical realism per se.

What attracts both Varo and Borges, and fuels their art-making, is the impact and influence of a sensibility to the seemingly invisible numinous in life experience and philosophical thought. This attraction to excavating this invisible presence can inspire, and in its most undiluted potential, initiate, a sense of self-forgetting, which in turn is related to memory and time-consciousness, as well as to the dream state, which is paramount in Varo paintings and especially in Borges’s poetry.

When Husserl describes fantasy or the imagination as a representation of something, this is of course evident in the sense of storytelling or fabulism in some of Varo’s paintings and some of Borges’s stories. In the latter, Borges often uses so-called real references within imaginary fabulist contexts. Proper names, for example,
are both used as they are understood in conventional reality and as used in assigned literary roles. Although this is obviously not unique to Borges’s literary work, his life and his literary work interweave in many ways, as do Varo’s life and her paintings. The Husserlian temporal aspect can be complex because fantasy is not like memory:

The fantasized image is apprehended in the present tense although that present is not itself experienced as perceptual present tense. By the same token, the fantasized image can reappear and be recovered in memory, so it has a certain kind of identity transcending the act of fantasy (Moran and Cohen, 120-121).

Given the specific fabulist storytelling technique underlying narratively in the art of Borges and Varo, the content of their work is best described as irrealistic. Thus it is useful to consider what irrealism is, which is something more than simply being unrealistic. Since scholarship is obliged to question presuppositions, it would be less than scholarly to presume everyone knows exactly what reality or realism is. I would suggest that reality is generally understood to be “what you see is what you get” or—following the lead of The Oxford English Dictionary in order to deepen that rather superficial version of reality—“The quality or state of being real. Real existence; what is real rather than imagined or desired; the aggregate of real things or existences; that which underlies and is the truth of appearances or phenomena” ("reality, n."). In other words, imagination itself is not considered to be real but imaginary, and indeed, Husserl’s use of “phantasy” as a synonym of the imagination signals that usage.

However, the irrealistic work of Varo and Borges (and other artists and writers) resist conventional definitions of reality, as well as most literary or artistic
genres, signaling the paramount importance of making art. Noting that the ostensible “goal of narratology is the objective, almost scientific, classification of literary texts” (Swinford 176), Dean Swinford defines irrealism as a “particular mode of postmodern allegory” (176-177) in the sense that artistic products are a response to the mutation and usurpation of the natural world by the economy and characteristics of contemporary culture. Swinford does observe, however, that irrealism is not easy to classify:

The attempt to define Irrealism as a literary and artistic mode allows for an analysis of a current of cultural development without overloading the already cumbersome narratological critical vocabulary. Irrealism is a term which does not define an entire genre, a single species or family, but a group of characteristics adapted by different cloth-bound creatures to accommodate for widespread variations in their increasingly unnatural habitat. To define a new genre is an impossible project because, to some extent, each individual text is its own genre, and each specimen a species (177).

This last point is relevant here, and to some extent it is relevant for all attempts to classify anything. Irrealism can serve as a general label for art challenging notions of reality, but as Swinford himself emphasizes: “Furthermore, these works which I classify as Irreal, such as, among others, Italo Calvino’s Cosmicomics, Jorge Luis Borges’ Ficciones, and the paintings of Remedios Varo, are themselves interested in patterns, puzzles, classification” (178).
This is key—that the work of Borges and Varo are inherently unrealistic and thus continually undermine presumptions about reality, a fact both delightful and challenging. While acknowledging that one definition of irrealism could be described as an indicator of postmodern allegory, and in spite of the fact that Borges’s work has been called both high modern and postmodern, I would hesitate to define irrealism as a postmodernist phenomenon. One could easily argue that the art of Hieronymus Bosch, work that greatly influenced the young Remedios Varo, is irreal. In fact, Swinford does compare two paintings, one by Varo and one by Bosch, using Bosch’s *The Last Judgment* (fig. 36) as an example of Christian allegory of symbolic language.

![Fig. 36. Hieronymus Bosch. The Last Judgment. Oil-on-wood triptych. c. 1482. Left and right panels: 167.7 x 60 cm and center panel 164 x 127 cm. Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna.](image)

Irrealism is a principle key to understanding Borges and Varo, and while Swinford’s theory of the irreal as allegorical postmodernism is not inherently invalid,
there are other definitions and theories for irrealism. In his *The Art of Fiction*, writer and critic John Gardner describes irrealism as one of several genres that are “non-realistic movements—Kafkaesque expressionism, and the formalist ‘irrealism’ of writers like Borges and Barthelme” (136). Gardner, discussing the fiction of Donald Barthelme, notes that writers who, like Barthelme, are irrealists are working outside of conventional fiction, and have abandoned “the attempt to deal directly with reality” (138).

Alice Whittenburg agrees with Gardner that irrealism aims to translate psychological reality into physical reality. Whittenburg adds that an attempt to depict psychological reality as physical reality “imitates the reality of a dream” (149), and she goes on to discuss Erich Fromm’s discussion of “accidental symbols” in individual writers:

However, we contend that, in irreal fiction, the dreamlike nature of the work is sustained precisely by the writer’s use of accidental symbols without comment. Borges’ labyrinth, Kafka’s bureaucratic mazes, Carrington’s horses¹⁶¹ all seem to come from intense personal experiences but are used in fiction as they occur in a dream—without comment and with intense emotional and psychological import. As a result, irreal fiction, like dreams, is both deeply personal and truly international (150).

The definition of irrealism used in this study is closest to a combination of descriptions offered by Alice Whittenburg and G.S. Evans. In describing the distinction between magical realism, fairy tales, and other forms of fantasy related
realism as compared to irrealism, Evans notes, “One of the key differences is that in these other genres, there is an internal consistency to the ‘impossible’ physics of the story; that is, once the reader understands and accepts this alternative physics, he or she can assume that the story and the world it describes will be consistent with it” (153). In other words, in the other genres a special physics is set up by the author of the story so that this physics is maintained throughout the story: “In an irreal story, however, not only is the physics underlying the story impossible, as it is in other genres, but is also fundamentally and essentially unpredictable (in that it is not based on any traditional or scientific conception of physics) and unexplained” (Evans, “What is Irrealism?” 154). These two elements—the unpredictable and the unexplained—are clearly primary to the work of Borges and Varo. Interestingly, this description works of irrealism stands as a description of wonder as well.

Also, while Borges’s creative process bears some resemblance to other “literary philosophers” such as Italo Calvino and Umberto Eco,¹⁶² the point here is that Borges’s fictional writing and poetry contain a combination of philosophical, fabulist, and other literary elements, including an erudite intertextuality and an interest in mysticism, all of which are topics or aspects of storytelling that are not alien to the fable. Varo combines these elements and uses them in her visual narratology. Both artists present an irreal quality to their fabulist storytelling, which are not simply a fantasy, a term too general to describe their work.

“Fantasy” has a broader range of meanings and uses (“fantasy | phantasy, n.”)¹⁶³, but rather than used as a literary genre or as a psychological term, fantasy is emphasized and explicated as a Husserlian phenomenological understanding of
fantasy as “imagination, or the process or the faculty of forming mental representations of things not actually present” ("fantasy | phantasy, n." definitions 4a, 4b, 4c). That process is evident in the work of both Varo and Borges. As was explicated in Chapter One on Husserlian transcendental phenomenology, the structural aesthetic workings of fantasy or creative imagination can be examined in detail in the fabulist work of Varo and Borges. That their work is rooted in wonder even before being subsequently called magical, mysterious, fantastic or imaginative would seem to be a simple point, but as will be seen ahead, it is a complex topic less explored than one might expect.

The fable is a distinct form of fiction. In fact, fable can be understood to be different from fiction, according to Foucault, who notes that fiction is “an ‘aspect’ of the fable” (*Aesthetics* 137). The fable, Foucault emphasizes, is what is functioning within a narrative as episodes, characters, or other content being related, whereas fiction is the narrative system (*Aesthetics* 137). Nonetheless, a fable is generally considered to be a genre of storytelling, or what would be categorized under fiction. How a fable differs from a fairy tale, folk tale, anecdote, parable or apologue is clear in some respects and nebulous in other ways. The last two categories mentioned—parable and apologue—are the closest in kind to fables, although the distinctions between even those three labels are less than absolute. The main difference between a parable and a fable is that a fable can include anthropomorphized characters—animals, plants, and even inanimate objects, while a parable does not; both can express a moral lesson, but this moral instructive quality is not an obligated characteristic for a fable. The apologue usually does contain moral instruction, but
like a fable can have anthropomorphized animals, plants and objects. George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, for example, can be described as an apologue. Thus, while apologue is perhaps the nearest literary cousin of fable, inherent moral instruction is not mandatory for a fable. Again, these distinctions are not always clear. The fable, like some of the other categories of storytelling, is an ancient form, and one that is universal among the world’s cultures. Storytelling in India and Africa in particular have strong connections to fabulism. Famously classic fabulists in Europe include Aesop, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, and even Leonardo da Vinci. In modern times, Leo Tolstoy, Franz Kafka, Ambrose Bierce, James Thurber, Italo Calvino, and Jorge Luis Borges have all been described as fabulists. In the interest of consistency, but also because these artists are often (although not always) creating work within a sphere that can be described as fabulism, the term fabulist is used here for both Borges and Varo.

The highly idiosyncratic oeuvres of Varo and Borges reflect the synergetic interaction that arises between individual consciousness and a sense of universality and prior unity inherent in many artistic sensibilities aimed at locating and expressing the numinous in art. Borges and Varo’s respective preferences to acknowledge and portray human consciousness and human self-identification at the root of their fabulist storytelling—no matter how unrealistic and strange—becomes one of the most accessible and most luminous factors of their art.

Borges and Varo’s uses of unreal fabulism are related to subjectivity and intersubjectivity. Thus it is relevant to understand how Husserl’s work with fantasy is related to Borges and Varo’s irrealism, because much about Husserlian
fantasy or imagination can be incorporated into fabulist storytelling, including their orientations to time and space.

**The Temporal-Spatial Theme**

There are a number of themes that appear in the work of both Varo and Borges, albeit via different approaches, that define both artists’ work as unrealistic fabulist narratives. While narrative remains central to the creative processes of each, it must be emphasized that when we speak of narrative in Varo and Borges, we must necessarily accentuate nonlinear narrative. Time and space are challenged and reshaped for artistic purpose in their work, while at the same time subjective self-identification disintegrates and recombines in startling ways. Varo and Borges add a spatial-temporal plasticity to their narratives, which makes sense also in that spatial-temporal plasticity is inherent in irrealism.

A concept of journey-as-search, or journey-as-revelation sometimes arises in relation to time. One theme surfacing in much of their work is an artistic reflection and in some cases direct acknowledgement of an invisible eternal and infinite absolute that is real beyond socially presumed conventions of physical appearances and conventional presumptions about spatial mechanics. These sometimes playful themes, in other words, seem more substantial in the context of fabulist storytelling than either unquestioned rote belief or uninspected denial of ontological “reality.”

Questioning reality and presuppositional belief systems about the world and self while simultaneously envisioning underlying, even invisible appearances are not unique to fables. Genres like science fiction and magical realism, surrealism and cubism, and especially some modernist non-objective abstract painting enter this
philosophical terrain of invisible and redefined reality. However, those genres of visual and literary art are not fabulist art in the sense that the storytelling narratives of Varo and Borges are fables.

While an underlying reality—which is described as a numinous presence in this study—can be explored by the artistic genres mentioned above, the main point is that many works of literary and visual art explore what seems to be hidden behind outer appearances. This numinous, invisible presence can be felt, experienced and expressed through some styles of art making and some art, including the fabulist art of Varo and Borges.

Another issue is to consider how the portrayal of human identification is an orientation to art for life’s sake. This particular usage of the phrase “art for life’s sake” is intended to reference neither the 1875-1920 American arts and crafts movement nor a superficial notion or theory that every person is an accomplished artist, however genuine and significant those types of topics may be in their own contexts. More relevant renderings of art for life’s sake in the context of the present study are the ideas and writings of Ellen Dissanayake and Mikhail Bakhtin.

**Art for Life’s Sake: Dissanayake**

Dissanayake’s view of art for life’s sake is distilled into to what she refers to as a “palaeoanthropsychobiological” description of art that includes, Dissanayake notes, several interrelated points:

First, that the idea of art encompasses all of human history (i.e., as far back as the Paleolithic or even earlier): second, that it include all human societies (i.e., is anthropological or cross-cultural); and third,
that it accounts for the fact that art is a psychological or emotional need and has psychological or emotional effects. Most people would probably agree that their personal “idea of art” includes these things, but I will show you that as presently practiced and taught in the West, art is a conceptual ragbag or casserole full of the most incompatible and confusing notions” (“Art for Life’s Sake” 169).\textsuperscript{165}

While Dissanayake’s assertion about art in the West makes palaeoanthropsychobiological sense, she also makes a point about the modern distinction between art and decoration, thereby addressing how an elitist presumption feeds the idea that art is a superfluous activity as compared with seemingly more critical sociopolitical issues:

To be sure, among the settlers of our country, women—motivated perhaps by notions of gentility—did put pictures on the walls, curtains at the window, embroidered covers on the pillows. James Agee, in \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men}, describes the lacelike paper cutouts made by a sharecropper’s wife to decoratively edge her mantelpiece. And young ladies of the 1920’s, going out to work or aspiring to become proper housewives, learned from books like Harriet and Vetta Goldstein’s \textit{Art in Every Day Life} how to dress themselves and furnish their homes with good taste (\textit{Art and Intimacy} 175).\textsuperscript{166}

Dissanayake emphasizes that since women have been, “disparaged and disregarded, so have, perhaps by association, artists—for similarly reasons: they are traditionally more concerned with appearance (‘making things nice’) and involvement
with other people and their emotional needs” (*Art and Intimacy* 175-176). A search for a universal evolutionary aesthetic standard, however, is sure to require an unearthing of the idea of beauty, which in modern times has led a vast array of opinions. Dissanyake emphasizes that a “naturalistic criteria for aesthetic quality” (*Art and Intimacy* 209) does exist, a criteria rooted in the Greek *aesthetikos*, or sense perception, which also includes the sensation or feeling of beauty. While it is a given that sensation enters into every human action or engagement, contemporary society—and especially contemporary art and academic society—generally questions the notion and feeling of beauty:

> Over recent decades, and for what seem like good democratic reasons, we have learned to shun terms such as “beauty,” “quality,” and “transcendence” and deny the ideas they embody. While these words were staples of Victorian conversations about the elevating effects of art, they have become as unmentionable and taboo in contemporary discourse as “breast” and “thigh” were to the Victorians. With their residue of patriarchy, privilege, religiosity, and European dominion, the very words now imply a kind of unexamined self-satisfaction, self-interest, and ultra-conservatism that has become widely suspect (*Art and Intimacy* 207).

While the discrediting of beauty and aesthetic value by postmodernist theory makes sociopolitical sense in regards to critically addressing the presumptions of self-interests and presumed elitist privileges of the powerful in society, something is also lost via the inhibitive nature of that sociopolitical injunction. Dissanyake goes on to
point out that evolutionist art theorists also presume that human beings make choices that are ultimately beneficial for the person making a choice. The logic of that argument and the cultural experience underlying such choices seems clear if art is understood to be “an accidental by-product of big brains” (Art and Intimacy 207) and the “enticements of our adaptive interests” (Art and Intimacy 208), but what if art is understood to be a more universal human motivation and capacity? What if art-making is as natural to Homo sapiens as sex and reproduction, or food gathering and eating? This is certainly part of Dissanyake’s argument, and if one studies the evidence of all artistic history sans any unconscious Eurocentric intellectual theoretical bias or consciously constructed and arbitrary art history categorizations, that possibility presents its own validation. From the Chauvet, Lascaux, and Altamira cave art to the art of Joseph Cornell, Adolf Wölfli, Banksy and other graffiti artists, and the countless examples between the prehistoric and the contemporary, art for life’s sake is everywhere evident as a primary manifestation.

**Art for Life’s Sake: Bakhtin**

Of the numerous possible scholarly explications of art for life’s sake, several are clearly relevant in the work of Mikhail Bakhtin. As noted by Deborah Haynes, “Of particular focus are [Bakhtin’s] ideas regarding ‘art for life’s sake’ and ‘theoretism’ (Bakhtin Reframed 11).” Considering the former idea, and the distinctions between art for art’s sake and art for life’s sake that, as Haynes notes, was asserted earlier by Kant, Schiller, Goethe, Schelling, and others, “the intersection of art and life that Bakhtin valued” (12) is key to understanding the orientations of Varo and Borges.
Bakhtinian Carnivalesque, Dialogical, Polyphonic Elements in Varo and Borges

In fact, a number of Bakhtinian theories are relevant when examining Varo's paintings and Borges's stories. Bakhtin's theory of "carnivalesque" can help explicate their artistic preferences for irrealism, as well as reflecting artistically "art for life's sake." Carnivalesque is especially useful for explicating Varo's paintings, which reflect various aspects of unconventional social turmoil and self-identification, search, and mystery. Also Bakhtin's "dialogism" is useful in understanding the storytelling or narrative drive of both artists, and how they deal with subjectivity in their respective creative inventions, especially for Borges, whose literary characters can be immersed in multiple perspectives that contrast monologism with polyphonic and dialogic dynamics, even within a single protagonist:

Bakhtin conceives existence as the kind of book we call a novel, or more accurately as many novels (the radically manifold world proposed by Bakhtin looks much like Borges’s Library of Babel), for all of us write our own such text, a text that is then called our life. Bakhtin uses the literary genre of the novel as an allegory for representing existence as the condition of authoring (Holquist 30).

Furthermore, some of these Bakhtinian issues can be related coherently to Husserlian phenomenological explications of memory, fantasy, and image consciousness in the specific work of Varo and Borges.

The Bakhtinian carnivalesque elucidates the use of irrealist fabulism in the writings of Borges and paintings of Varo while also signaling a life-positive orientation to the human being, one that affirms a sensibility of art for life’s sake. In
his *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin considers the role of the carnivalesque in the festive life of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, including its relationship to the medieval festival known as the Feast of Fools. Bakhtin broadens that orientation into a cultural and literary assessment of the carnival spirit that can be applied beyond his study of Rabelais’s *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. Bakhtin presents the carnivalesque as a merging of the sacred with the irreligious or profane, inspiring an anti-authoritarian, contrarian celebration of life and art. A liberating attitude towards the humor and the grotesque is inherent in the carnivalesque, and has been noted earlier, humor is one of the cardinal elements in the creativity of Varo and Borges. Disorder and chaos merged with a sense of openness to the world and the human spirit in the sense of Bakhtinian “gay relativity” yields what can be described as an abasement of authority that yields not only freedom but spiritual affirmation. As a celebration of the human body and spirit, even in its grotesqueness, the carnival or carnivalesque lends power to an undermining of hierarchical officialdom and authoritative presuppositions. Borges and Varo each respectively finds an ability to combine carnivalesque humor with a spiritual gravitas through their fabulist excursions into irreality.

Irrealism allows an artist to obliquely address reality, as is evident in many of Varo’s paintings and Borges’s stories. While the landscape of their respective visual and literary storytelling might be called a form of fantasy, the sense of feast in the midst of journey—a celebratory anarchy or bedlam considerably more disarrayed and complex than Hemmingway’s moveable feast—leaves in its wake a challenging response to authoritative pieties missed by more widely acknowledged genres and categories. Both artists immerse their work in popular cultural while simultaneously
challenging, through the carnivalesque, categorical presumptions and cultural limitations of a seemingly stabilized society.

Bakhtin’s concepts like dialogue and the dialogic are also relevant here. Deborah Haynes writes about the significance of dialogue in Bakhtin’s work:

First, dialogue refers to the fact that every utterance is by nature dialogic. Second, dialogue means utterances that are directed to someone in a unique situation, and thus dialogue can be either monologic or dialogic. Third, Bakhtin understood life itself as dialogue. We participate in such dialogues our entire lives, with our bodies and through the acts we undertake. Dialogue, therefore, is epistemological. Only through dialogue do we know ourselves, other persons and the world *(Bakhtin Reframed 142)*.

Thus, even in the midst of employing dialogism as a literary aesthetic concept, Bakhtin remains rooted in life itself. That Borges and Varo’s works pivot on the theme of art for life’s sake signals how art cannot be divorced from or unrelated to human existence.

Nor is this without a strong connection to phenomenology, one scholar, using Merleau-Ponty’s work\(^{169}\) to address dialogue and life in Bakhtin, writes: “Like Bakhtin, Merleau-Ponty sees the human subject as living on borderlines, essentially tuned to the other, within and without” (Erdinast-Vulcan 157).

**Bataille as Artist-Philosopher**

In regards to presenting an additional example of the writings of an artist-philosopher, the work of Georges Bataille is worth mentioning in that it might be
described as presenting a highly emotive version of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque.

Similarly, like Borges, Bataille is an atypical seeker of spiritual truth, albeit one more expressive and disclosed about sacred orientations in art than Borges. Bataille’s approach is asymmetric in the sense that his search for the numinous is continually being revised to express the multifarious aspects of seeking the seemingly incommunicable mystery of the sacred. Although he shared with Schopenhauer and Borges a reluctance to acknowledge a more conventional or religious approach to spirituality in art, it is his passion for that search that is underscored: “Bataille was a seeker after God, even though he didn’t admit it, ‘a new mystic,’ who would propose a desertion of History in favor of ‘ecstatic swoon’” (Besnier 13). Bataille, perhaps partly due to his emotional nature, proved incapable of suppressing his attraction to the numinous in spite of his intellectual aspirations:

I too ‘want to see myself as an intellectual’ provided that I do not take it lightly—that is, provided that I do not give the impression of being ‘upright’ and honest by renouncing my espousal of existence in its totality, on the pretext of restricting myself to knowledge, or by letting it be imagined that it is possible scientifically to overcome ‘the unpredictable course of things’ (15).

Bataille’s words echo his orientation to knowledge and nonknowledge, his resistance to the virtually universal acceptance of scientific materialism as a measure of validity, and his observations about chance and the limitations of conventional or fixed approaches to intellectuality.

It does not matter if a reader or viewer judges something to be real or not real
because fabulist art exists via the representative function of imagination. To reiterate what was emphasized above, the imagined object, which is to say the represented object, does not have to exist in the same spatial or temporal setting as the so-called real object being represented by the imagination.

Real existence means what? One definition: “What is real rather than imagined or desired; the aggregate of real things or existences; that which underlies and is the truth of appearances or phenomena” ("reality, n."). In other words, imagination itself is not considered to be real but imaginary, and indeed, Husserl’s use of “phantasy” as a synonym of the imagination signals that usage. However, given that the irrealistic work of Varo and Borges (and other artists and writers) resist conventional definitions of reality, as well as any literary or artistic genre, also points to the paramount importance of art. Genre-making seems to be an irresistible impulse for many literary and art theorists and critics, and while a philosopher like Nelson Goodman can accurately define and describe irrealism in epistemological terms, irrealism itself defies categorization.

At this point, it is useful to describe the irreal fabulism of Borges and Varo separately in more detail.

**Borges: Artist-Philosopher**

Although Borges, one of the most erudite creative writers of modern times, has been described as a literary philosopher, Borges never described himself as a philosopher: “Borges was not a philosopher, and never considered himself to be one” (Griffin 5). From a distance, then, philosophy and theory might be seen by a spectator as two anxiously hungry dogs following Borges—in spite of his ignoring them—
during one of his walks through the streets of Buenos Aires. Borges approached philosophy via his own highly individual path, primarily an oblique literary approach of a philosophical storyteller. “I am neither a philosopher nor a metaphysician; what I have done is to exploit [expolar: also ‘explode’], or to explore—a more noble word—the literary possibilities of philosophy” (Johnson 1).

In other words, Borges uses philosophy for his art, something that is apparent for any reader of his fabulist work. Borges is working, in a highly creative and frequently playful way, with philosophy in the manner of an artist-philosopher despite his claim to not being a philosopher. Although Borges claimed he could not read Kant, his lifelong reading of Schopenhauer is well-known, as is his longtime interest in the writings and ideas of the Swedish theologian and mystic Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), the writings of William James, and other thinkers who did not shy away from topics about the numinous and related topics.

An influence on the young Borges in Buenos Aires was his father’s friend Macedonio Fernández, an eccentric writer, humorist, philosopher, and attorney whose thoughts, talks, and writings reflected an extreme idealism (Williamson, Borges, 96). Macedonio’s influence on Borges is related to issues such as subjectivity and irrealism:

In later years Borges came to regard Macedonio Fernandez as a far better talker that he was a writer. Even so, the influence of Macedonio’s ideas on Borges’s writing was crucial, especially as regards two fundamental themes that would not come to maturity until the 1940’s—the “unreality” of the material world and the nonexistence
of the “I,” or individual subject. Borges would elaborate this latter idea into one of his most striking themes—the arbitrariness of personal identity, the notion that an individual could, in principle, be any other, an idea he had already come across in Schopenhauer (Williamson, *Borges*, 97).

In Borges’s case, his interest in mysticism is often acknowledged by literary scholars as being only a peripheral phenomenon. Yet the opposite could be argued and has been argued by some writers and scholars. Borges’s interest in numinous was clearly more than a peripheral matter only distantly related to being a literary artist. The titles of some of his creative writings alone indicate Borges’s interest in this area, including pieces like “The Aleph,” “The Cult of the Phoenix,” and “The Approach to Al-Mu’tasim.” Likewise, Borges’s philosophical bent is evident in his titles: “A Problem,” “Everything and Nothing,” “The Other,” and “His End and His Beginning,” among many others.

Consider, for example, “A Problem.” As he did years earlier in “Pierre Menard, Author of Quixote,” Borges pivots his story around one of the world’s preeminent masterpieces of fictions, *The Ingenius Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha* (*El ingenioso hidalgo don Quijote de la Mancha*). However, it is how he accomplishes this creative appropriation that is significant in “a Problem.”

“Let us imagine…” opens this fable (*Collected Fictions* 308). As mentioned earlier, Husserl uses the word phantasy as a synonym for imagination. What is immediately “given” in Husserlian terms is the appearance of an object of fantasy. The reader, then, receives or intuits that presentation, which because this is a work of
imagination is actually a re-presentation. Yet as always with Borges, the line between imagination or fantasy and so-called reality is nebulous in that the narrative is a woven strand of what is “real” (historical) and imaginary, a strand described in this study as irrealism. The entire opening sentence of “A Problem” reads, “Let us imagine that a piece of paper with a text in Arabic on it is discovered in Toledo, and that paleographers declare the text to have been written by that same Cide Hamete Benengeli from whom Cervantes derived Don Quixote” (308).

After openly declaring the imaginary state, or re-presentation of this “piece of paper,” the author immediately begins to construct a communication based on an amalgamation of fantasy and fact. One might say Borges is “bracketing in” facts into his fables or stories. The character Cide Hamete Benengeli is not a historical person, yet neither is he invented by Borges. Benengeli is a character invented by Cervantes who is then appropriated by Borges. References like the Arabic text and Toledo are obviously “factual.” This kind of creative invention in fiction is not unique to Borges, of course, but, as noted earlier, how he accomplishes that creative process in a scholarly style reflects a distinctive Borgesian style. In a single fabulist sentence Borges presents elements of irrealism, literary intertextuality, and an undermining of historical authenticity. The question then arises as to whether or not Borges’s work can be more clearly understood via critical theory explications.

**Borges and Critical Theory**

In terms of structuralist and poststructuralist critical theory, while there was some positive acknowledgement of Borges’s literary creations, there was scant in-depth critical regard for his work until critics and literary scholars began to write
studies of Borges. Foucault’s positive response to Borges has been discussed earlier. Michael Wood, in an essay titled “Borges and Theory,” describes how Borges draws near to some of the common issues in French theory without actually merging with them:

The world of Borges’s fiction, in its most amply philosophically mischievous measures, maps very convincingly on to a number of preoccupations we find in (French) critical theory, associated in particular with the names of, respectively, Michael Foucault, Louis Althusser, Roland Barthes, and Jacques Lacan. I am thinking of discourse (rather than material event) as the source of meaning in history; ideology as ubiquitous and unavoidable (rather than representing any given set of chosen political assumptions); mythology as an aspect of every day contemporary life; and the realm of the symbolic as that of shared social existence. These notions differ from each other in important ways, of course, but each has a touch of Borges about it, and each involves a system of meaning which allows for the investigation of realities felt to be (often distressingly) out of reach or caught up in complicated mediations (33).

The final sentence is a lucid summation of the relationship between Borges and critical theory. Wood adds:

“If his writing forms an attractive provocation for Foucault, and a half-denied parallel project for Lacan, for other Europeans it is something like an indispensable reference, the mark of a stylish and
informed modernity, and an acknowledgment that playfulness too
must be part of any sophisticated skepticism” (33).

Other theorists such as Jacques Derrida, who references two quotations from
Borges in his essay “Plato’s Pharmacy” but does not substantially comment on
Borges beyond Borges’s words—words Derrida uses primarily to support his own
argument (Wood 34)—knew about Borges but did not write extensively or directly
about his work. Julia Kristeva responded similarly, noted Wood: “Julia Kristeva’s
chief allusion to Borges is similar in style to Derrida’s: a swift evocation and a trail of
associations” (35). Wood goes on to say that Kristeva does quote from Borges’s
story “The Cruel Redeemer Lazarus Morrell” in his A Universal History of Iniquity
because in “Morrell’s sinister ingenuity Kristeva finds an allegory of modern writing,
cut off from the sacred” (36), but he accurately points out that she goes on to
emphasize her own, not Borges’s, accents of horror, which are like a void beneath
beautiful artifices:

Borges certainly looks into this void, and his elegant, worldly irony
recognizes, or glances at, all kinds of horrors. But he doesn’t sink into
them. His writing is a way of navigating the space between the dark
and the light (36).

This elucidates a key point for both Borges and Varo’s work—they both
 navigated a route between dark and light, and yet neither artist sank into darkness or
negativity, partly because of their playfulness and humor, but primarily because of
their respective searches for the numinous.
Wood discusses Borges and Roland Barthes as well. Although in his writings and lectures Barthes never mentioned Borges, they were on the same page, so to speak, in that, as Wood says, “…what really connects Borges and Barthes, makes them ‘precursors’ of each other, so to speak, is the sense not that the author is hidden or ghostly or inaccessible or not needed but that the reader creates the author” (37).

Wood points out that Borges’s story “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote” from the 1944 *The Garden of Forking Paths (El jardín de senderous que se bifurcan)* perfectly reflects this notion of the reader creating the author.

In fact, there is much about “Pierre Menard” that echoes Borges’s role in this study: questions of subjectivity, reality, fantasy, memory, and invisible presence, among others. As in much of Borges’s fabulist literature, the opening paragraph of this story conveys a seemingly authentic scholarly tone, with compelling and seemingly factual details from life and history. Most importantly, at least to this reader, is that a resonant, attractive quality arises as the words flow by. This resonant and arresting feeling remains distant yet unmistakably present in the reader’s awareness, forming initially a confluence of narration and reader consciousness, but quickly establishing a sense of assimilation between the narrative and the reader, and between the characters and the reader, an amalgamating quality that instills a sense of intersubjective singularity in the reader. Existing on the cusp between conscious and unconscious awareness, the reader begins to identify with the anonymous author presenting the narrative:

The visible oeuvre left by this novelist can be easily and briefly enumerated; unpardonable, therefore, are the omissions and additions
perpetrated by Mme. Henri Bachelier in a deceitful catalog that a
certain newspaper, whose Protestant leaning are surely no secret, has
been so inconsiderate as to inflict upon that newspaper’s deplorable
readers—few and Calvinist (if not Masonic and circumcised) though
they be. Menard’s true friends have greeted that catalog with alarm,
and even with a degree of sadness. One might note that only yesterday
were we gathered before his marmoreal place of rest, among the dreary
cypresses, and already Error is attempting to tarnish his bright
Memory….Most decidedly, a brief rectification is imperative
(\textit{Collected Fictions} 88).

Also evident in the opening to “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote” are
some of the qualities mentioned earlier by Michael Wood that are present in the
majority of Borges’s creative work: discourse, ideology, mythology, the symbolic.
The narrator goes on to reveal that Menard has authored many obscure and
philosophical works, and has written two chapters of \textit{Don Quixote}. Yet Menard’s
writings are not exactly the same two chapters of Don Quixote written by Miguel de
Cervantes, or more accurately, they are and they are not. How can this be? It is
actually Borges’s narrator who addresses this issue:

It is a revelation to compare the \textit{Don Quixote} of Pierre Menard with
that of Miguel de Cervantes. Cervantes, for example, wrote the
following (Part I, Chapter IX):

…truth, whose mother is history, rival of time, depository of deeds,
witness of the past, exemplar and adviser to the present, and the
future’s counselor. This catalog of attributes, written in the
seventeenth century, and written by the “ingenious layman” Miguel de
Cervantes, is mere rhetorical praise of history. Menard, on the other
hand, writes:

…truth, whose mother is history, rival of time, depository of
deeds, witness of the past, exemplar and advisor to the present,
and the future’s counselor.

History, the mother of truth!—the idea is staggering. Menard, a
contemporary of William James, defines history not as delving into
reality but as the very fount of reality. Historical truth, for Menard, is
not “what happened”; it is what we believe happened. The final
phrases—exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future’s
counselor—are brazenly pragmatic (94).

That both versions of the commentary above—that of Cervantes and
Menard—are identical, says everything about Borges and his ability to
simultaneously disclose and deceive, to graciously bestow and mischievously beguile,
while entertaining and transporting the reader. Borges transports the reader into his
irreal storytelling, and once the reader is within the story, he or she becomes almost
unknowingly activated as a participant—the fabricator, commentator, and narrator of
a fabulist tale. A number of issues germane to the present study surface in this kind of
milieu—two being the self-forgetting and not-knowing experiences of the reader-
narrator. Also apparent is the plasticity of thought—inherent temporal-spatial
alignments and instability of what is only apparently stable philosophical truth.
Borges does not hesitate to dismantle ontological and epistemological presuppositions; he continuously challenges intellectual belief systems. In “Pierre Menard” the narrator says:

There is no intellectual exercise that is not ultimately pointless. A philosophical doctrine is, at first, a plausible description of the universe; the years go by, and it is a mere chapter—if not a paragraph or proper noun—in the history of philosophy (94).

Being himself a master of philosophical obscurity allows Borges to create a forest of non-sequiturs for thinkers. Entering one of Borges’s famous mazes is a philosophical, even an aesthetic risk. In fact, the reluctance of Lacan, Derrida, Barthes, and other modern French theorists to adequately address Borges’s work may be partly due to its idiosyncratic, unrealistic style, confounding any preconceived expectations—literal, narratological, philosophical or theoretical. In some respects, Borges can be more obscure and oblique than some of the French theorists who have occasionally been accused of being obscure and oblique. What makes Borges’s fabulism in some sense as rich if not richer than the work of those illustrious theorists is that theorists, despite being at times brilliantly original and witty, often take themselves very seriously. Does Borges take himself seriously? At some level, how could he not? Yet Borges remains a genius of elegant and playful humor, even of a kind of quiet hilarity and self-effacement. His work reflects a quality—not his primary quality, perhaps, but nonetheless on that is always present—of not quite trusting philosophy either in his beloved library or in himself.
On the other hand, it could also be argued that Borges’s work was simply a literary precursor of what later came to be developed by the French theorists:

In “Pierre Menard,” Borges presents a conception of writing which is radically new, indeed revolutionary, and which seems to anticipate by some twenty years certain ideas developed by French theorists. Like Michael Foucault, Menard questions the existence of an objective historical reality and suggests that the reader constructs the so-called truths of history; like Julia Kristeva, Menard wants to show that a text is not an original piece of writing but a web of “intertextual” relations; and like Jacques Derrida, Menard denies the possibility of discovering the “presence” of an author in a literary text. Above all, the story heralds what Roland Barthes would famously call the “Death of the Author”—Menard’s project undermines that idea that a text communicates a message from what Barthes called the “Author-God.”

Every reader, therefore, is a kind of Pierre Menard who repeats the worlds of the text as he reads and changes their meaning as he adjusts them to his own subjectivity (Williamson, “Borges in Context,” 211).

Nonetheless, Jacques Derrida is well aware of Borges’s work. In what is one of Derrida’s most beautiful books, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, he considers with his usual insight and accomplished intertextual finesse some great writers who were blind or who became blind—Homer, Joyce, Milton, Borges (33). Derrida writes, “Borges begins with Homer; he then ends with Joyce—and, still
just as modestly, with the self-portrait of the author as a blind man, as a man of memory, and this, just after an allusion to castration” (35).

Borges discussed his making of fables at times. In one conversation with fellow Argentinian Osvaldo Ferrari in the 1980s about Borges’s upcoming second trip to Japan, Italy and Greece, Ferrari asks Borges why he still retained (at his advanced age and in spite of his blindness) an excellent facility for travel. Borges replied:

One reason would be my blindness, my feeling countries without being able to see them. If I stay in Buenos Aires, my life will be…insignificant. I will always be inventing fables, dictating. On the other hand, if I travel, I will be acquiring new impressions.

Impressions which will, in the end, turn into literature (Borges and Ferrari, Conversations Volume 1, 7).

This statement is interesting because it indicates that Borges was not simply “inventing” fables to dictate as short stories, but merging his fables with so-called real life. While referencing the non-fictional world and one’s personal life may be common, if not universal, with literary writers, merging fact with fiction was a paramount aspect of Borges’s work.

Besides Derrida’s book being an excellent example of erudition and his ability to apply heterogeneous approaches to a topic, it is a wonderful instance of the levels of complexity that sometimes arise with intertextuality—wherein an intertextual comment can be pivoted from another intertextual comment. Given the scholarly erudition of both Borges and Derrida, one can only wonder at what an active friendship between the two might have given the world.
To return to the point being discussed—there actually are connections between Borges and critical theorists. In a sense, one could argue that theorists and philosophers—at least in some cases and at least in certain moments—are so committed to their concepts that they unconsciously become trapped in an unintentional sophism. One challenge for scholars is determine how to navigate the exclusivities and limitations of scholarly language, as well as how to dismantle whatever academic conservatism might underlie scholarly professionalism. Borges almost invariably remains humble and even self-deprecating. Theorists, although some are modest individuals, are not, generally speaking, self-deprecating. One of the chief advantages the artist-philosopher has over other thinkers is straightforward—the artist-philosopher can present concepts, ideas, and even theories through making art. A preeminent contemporary thinker, Alain Badiou, has commented at length on the artist-philosopher dynamic:

A bond that is forever affected by a symptom, one of oscillation, of throbbing. From the very beginning there is Plato's judgement ostracizing poetry, theatre and music. By and large the founding father of philosophy—a refined connoisseur of the arts no doubt—preserves, in The Republic, only military music and patriotic chants. On the other hand, you find a pious devotion to art, a contrite bending of the concept, reasoned as technical nihilism, against the poetic word that alone proffers the world at the latent Openness of its own angst. Yet, after all, Protagoras the sophist, singled out the apprenticeship of arts as the key to education. There was an alliance of Protagoras and
Simonides the poet, which Plato's Socrates attempts to thwart the casuistry and enslave the rational's intensity to his own benefit. An image comes to mind, an analogous matrix of meaning: philosophy and art are historically coupled the way the Master and the Hysteric coalesce in Lacan. You know how the hysteric confronts the master and says: "The truth speaks through my tongue, I am 'there,' and you, who knows, do tell me who I am." And you surmise that whatever wisdom and subtleties lie in the master's reply, the hysteric will let him know it is not as yet that, that her "there" evades the catch, that all should be resumed, and a lot of effort is required to please her. She thereby takes command over the master and becomes maîtresse du maître. As it is, art is always already there, addressing the thinker with the silent and scintillating question of its own identity. However, through constant invention—its metamorphosis—art dismisses whatever the philosopher has to say concerning its own self (Badiou “Art and Philosophy”).

The artist in a thinker, or the thinker in an artist, creates an unusual situation. In Borges’s case, despite his rich and extensive literary output of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry, and his immense erudition, Borges is attracted to anonymity, obscurity, and self-imitation. The art of both Varo and Borges contains mirrors and labyrinths, conundrums and paradoxes. In a metaphorical sense, Borges is a richly attired clown who is attracted to and can deftly and eloquently transmit the carnivalesque and the grotesque via his unrealistic, fabulist narrative. In fact, as pointed out by Manuel
Durán and Fay R. Rogg, there are parallel universes in Borges’s Pierre Menard, and Cervantes’ Don Quixote, not to mention the work of another irreal storyteller, Franz Kafka:

Borges (1899-1986) and Kafka [1883-1924] have much in common. Both like parables. Kafka’s parables tend to be mysterious, dark, and tragic. Borges’s parables are more whimsical, sometimes contradictory and ambiguous, often disconcerting, and occasionally irritating. Borges plays games, invents nonexistent literary works, even encyclopedias. He creates fake footnotes; in other words, he has fun and at the same time sends messages for the reader to decipher. This technique is reminiscent of that found in murder mysteries where the reader may eventually guess the identity of the murderer after uncovering clues along the way (228).

And of course there are parallels between the narratives of Borges and Cervantes, which is another reason “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote” has long fascinated literary scholars. “Borges’s approach to criticism is ironic and devastating” (229). Durán and Rogg go on to address the Borgesian maze, which is significant enough to quote at length because the authors elucidate much about Borges’s work:

The words used to define history are the same, but [between Cervantes and Menard], but their meaning is not, simply because the cultural horizon has shifted toward relativity. Starting wit the Enlightenment and Kant’s philosophy, this fact erodes the belief in an absolute, immutable truth in the field of history, accessible to true, devoted,
scientific historians. Whatever Cervantes may have thought about
history, we are today less confident of reaching a perfect
understanding of the past, and Borges’s essay (or is it an obituary?)
states this in an ironic and oblique fashion; there will always be room
for another interpretation of the past. This applies to Cervantes’s
novel, which will be the subject of new interpretation as new
generations appear on the historic horizon. Borges himself stated again
and again that his readers have interpreted whatever he wrote and that
basically it is up to them to decide on the meaning of his work (230).

This point signals how what was asserted earlier in the present study—that a
work of art or literature is not complete until it is completed by the viewer or the
reader—is always relevant. That Duchamp emphasized this issue as well as Borges is
interesting; neither of them liked their work being categorized by scholars or fit into
definitive aesthetic categories.

**Borges and Subjectivity**

Borges’s fictional prose in pieces like “Borges and I” reflect an ongoing
struggle with subjectivity and the idea of self. Describing this “other” man—
“Borges,” the author “allows” both his and Borges’s existence, about which the
author of “Borges and I” feels, at best, ambivalence:

I t would be an exaggeration to say that our relationship is hostile—I
live, I allow myself to live, so that Borges can spin out his literature,
and that literature is my justification. I willingly admit that he has
written a number of sound pages, but those pages will not save me,
perhaps because the good in them no longer belongs to any individual, not even that other man, but rather to language itself, or to tradition. Beyond that, I am doomed—utterly and inevitably—to oblivion, and fleeting moments will be all of me that survives in that other man. Little by little, I have been turning everything over to him, though I know the perverse way he has of distorting and magnifying everything. Spinoza believed that all things wish to go on being what they are—stone wishes eternally to be stone, and tiger, to be tiger. I shall endure in Borges, not in myself (if, indeed, I am anybody at all), but I recognize myself less in his books than in many others’, or in the tedious strumming of a guitar (Collected Fictions 324).

Borges’s poetry expresses the emotional tone of this attraction to self-forgetting more directly. As emphasized by Jason Wilson (194), Borges, in his sonnet “On Waking” (El despertar” also translated as “Waking Up” in the 1964 collection The Self and the Other, or El otro el mismo) does express his desire to be released from self:

The trappings of my day also come back:
My voice, my face, my nervousness, my luck.
If only Death, that other waking-up,
Would grant me a time free of all memory
Of my own name and all that I have been!
If only morning meant oblivion! (Selected Poems 201)

[Vuelve también la cotidiana historia: }
Mi voz, mi rostro, mi temor, mi suerte.

¡Ah, si aquel otro despertar, la muerte,
Me deparara un tiempo sin memoria
De mi nombre y de todo lo que he sido!

¡Ah, si en esa mañana huybiera olvido! (Selected Poems 200-201)]

Another poetic rendering of the existential desire to acknowledge the paradoxical and bifurcated nature of self-identification is in a 1975 anthology in Borges’s poem “The Dream” or “El sueño” (Selected Poems 348-349).

“The Dream”

While the clocks of the midnight hours are squandering
an abundance of time,

I shall go, farther than the shipmates of Ulysses,
to the territory of dream, beyond the reach
of human memory.

From that underwater world I save some fragments,
inexhaustible to my understanding:
grasses from some primitive botany,
animals of all kinds,
conversations with the dead,
faces which all the time are masks,
words out of very ancient languages,
and at times, horror, unlike anything
the day can offer us.
I shall be all or no one. I shall be the other
I am without knowing it, he who has looked on
that other dream, my waking state. He weighs it up,
resigned and smiling.

[“El sueño”]

Cuando los relojes de la media noche prodiguen

Un tiempo generoso,

Iré más lejos que los bogavantes de Ulises

A la región del sueño, inaccessible

A la memoria humana.

De esa región inmersa rescato restos

Que no acabo de comprender:

Hierbas de sencilla botánica,

Animales algo diversos,

Diálogos con los muertos,

Rostros que realmente son mascaras,

Palabras de lenguajes muy antiguos

Y a veces un horror incomparable

Al que nos puede dar el día.

Seré todos o nadie. Seré el otro

Que sin saberlo soy, el que ha mirado

Ese otro sueño, mi vigilia. La juzga,

Resignado y sonriente.]
It should be noted that O’Rawe and others have proposed that Borges’s early poetry is more directly expressive of spiritual themes.

Borges also questioned throughout his adult life what was conventionally presumed to be “real.” In fact, Borges considered literature, which is to say art, to be more real than the material world that humankind presumes is real, the world within which art seems to be physically created. He questioned everything, which is clearly a philosophical orientation to the phenomena of life, and his questions arise in both his fabulist storytelling and in his non-fiction essays, a distinction that is itself sometimes a nebulous and shifting separation.

As noted, a primary characteristic of fables is an inclusion of animals and other creatures, some humanoid, others not, and some mythical or imaginary, others not. This characteristic is inherent in some of both artists’ work. In fact, for both of these fabulists, the interaction of humans and other species, and sometimes the blending of species, is an essential feature in their work.

Borges fascination with the tiger surfaces repeatedly in his fabulism. The narrator’s opening to “Blue Tigers” in his 1983 book, Shakespeare’s Memory, addresses this fascination.

A famous poem by Blake paints the tiger as a fire burning right and an eternal archetype of Evil; I prefer the Chesterton maxim that casts the tiger as a symbol of terrible elegance. Apart from these, there are no words that can rune [sic] the tiger, that shape which for centuries has lived in the imagination of mankind. I have always been drawn to the tiger. I know that as a boy I would linger before one particular cage at
the zoo; the others held no interest for me. I would judge encyclopedias and natural histories by their engravings of the tiger. When the Jungle Books were revealed to me I was upset that the tiger, Shere Khan, was the hero’s enemy. As the years passed, this strange fascination never left me; it survived my paradoxical desire to become a hunter as it did all common human vicissitudes (*Collected Fictions* 494).

The narrator in Borges “Blue Tigers” is a Scotsman working in India as a professor of Eastern and Western logic, who also hosts a weekly seminar on Spinoza, and who notes that “it may have been my love of tigers that brought me from Aberdeen to Punjab” (494). Tigers, he goes on to say, are always in his dreams. Included in Borges’s 1964 *Dreamtigers*, a collection of stories and poems, is a poem that offers some words that point to the importance of the tiger to Borges, and to other themes that attracted him: other animals, the library, the river, the quest, dreams.

“The Other Tiger”

*And the craft that createth a semblance*

—Morris: *Sigurd the Volsung* (1876)

I think of a tiger. The gloom here makes
The vast and busy Library seem lofty
And pushes the shelves back;
Strong, innocent, covered with blood and new,
It will move through its forest and its morning
And will print its tracks on the muddy
Margins of a river whose name it does not know

(In its world there are no names nor past
Nor time to come, only the fixed moment)

And will overleap barbarous distances
And will scent out of the plaited maze
Of all the scents the scent of dawn
And the delighting scent of deer.

Between the stripes of the bamboo I decipher
Its stripes and have the feel of the bony structure
That quivers under the glowing skin.

In vain do the curving seas intervene
And the deserts of the planet;
From this house in a far-off port
In South America, I pursue and dream you,
O tiger on the Ganges’ banks.

In my soul the afternoon grows wider and I reflect
That the tiger invoked in my verse
is a ghost of a tiger, a symbol,
A series of literary tropes
And memories from the encyclopaedia
And not the deadly tiger, the fateful jewel
That, under the sun or the varying moon,
In Sumatra or Bengal goes on fulfilling
Its rounds of love, of idleness and death.

To the symbolic tiger I have opposed
The real thing, with its warm blood,
That decimates the tribe of buffaloes
And today, the third of August, ’59,
Stretches on the grass a deliberate
Shadow, but already the fact of naming it
And conjecturing its circumstances
Makes it a figment of art and no creature
Living among those that walk the earth.

We shall seek a third tiger. This
Will be like those others a shape
Of my dreaming, a system of words
A man makes and not the vertebrate tiger
That, beyond the mythologies,
Is treading the earth. I know well enough
That something lays on me this quest
Undefined, senseless and ancient, and I go on
Seeking through the afternoon time
The other tiger, that which is not in verse

(Dreamtigers 70-71).

[“El Otro Tigre”]

Pienso en un tigre. La penumbra exalta
La vasta Biblioteca laboriosa

Y parece alejar los anaqueles;

Fuerte, inocente, ensangrentado y nuevo,

Él irá por su selva y su mañana

Y marcará su rastro en la limosa

Margen de un río cuyo nombre ignora

(En su mundo no hay nombres ni pasado

Ni porvenir, sólo un instante cierto.)

Y salvará las bárbaras distancias

Y husmeará en el trenzado laberinto

De los olores el olor del alba

Y el olor deleitable del venado;

Entre las rayas del bambú descifro

Sus rayas y presiento la osatura

Bajo la piel espléndida que vibra.

En vano se interponen los convexos

Mares y los desiertos del planeta;

Desde esta casa de un remoto puerto

De América del Sur, te sigo y sueño,

Oh tigre de las márgenes del Ganges.

Cunde la tarde en mi alma y reflexiono

Que el tigre vocativo de mi verso

Es un tigre de símbolos y sombras,
Una serie de tropos literarios
Y de memorias de la enciclopedia
Y no el tigre fatal, la aciaga joya
Que, bajo el sol o la diversa luna,

Va cumpliendo en Sumatra o en Bengala
Su rutina de amor, de ocio y de muerte.

Al tigre de los símbolos he opuesto
El verdadero, el de caliente sangre,

El que diezma la tribu de los búfalos
Y hoy, 3 de agosto del 59,

Alarga en la pradera una pausada
Sombra, pero ya el hecho de nombrarlo

Y de conjeturar su circunstancia

Lo hace ficción del arte y no criatura

Viviente de las andan por la tierra.

Un tercer tigre buscaremos.
Éste Será como los otros una forma

De mi sueño, un sistema de palabras

Humanas y no el tigre vertebrado

Que, más allá de las mitologías,

Posa la tierra. Bien lo sé, pero algo

Me impone esa aventura indefinida,

Insensata y antigua, y persevero
En buscar por el tiempo de la tarde

El otro tigre, el que no está en el verso.

In the final stanza, the third tiger appears as “a system of words / A man makes” (71) that serves an impulse of seeking, a seeking that drives Borges’s life and art.

In his essay “A New Refutation of Time,” Borges writes, “Had this refutation (or its title been published in the middle of the eighteenth century, it would be included in a bibliography by Hume, or at least mentioned by Huxley or Kemp Smith. But published in 1947 (after Bergson) it is the anachronistic reductio ad absurdum of an obsolete system, or even worse, the feeble artifice of an Argentine adrift on a sea of metaphysics” (Selected Non-fictions 317).

One obvious characteristic of Borges’s work is intertextuality, which in itself represents a philosophical facet of the temporal theme. Borges is a preeminent example of someone whose work is pervaded by an aesthetic of intertextuality.

**Borges, Time and Intertextuality**

Ancient authors become contemporary in some sense, and obscure voices grow famous in his storytelling. In “A New Refutation of Time,” an essay of 16 pages (Selected Non-fictions 317-332), Borges references David Hume, George Berkeley, and Arthur Schopenhauer repeatedly, but he also refers to the work of biologist Thomas Henry Huxley, philosophers Norman Kemp Smith and Henri Bergson, philosopher and mathematician Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, Buddhism and Tibetan mythology, sociological writer Gustav Spiller, Cartesian ideas, scientist and satirist
Georg Christoph Lichenberg, Mark Twain’s Huck Finn, Peruvian Captain Isidoro Suárez, essayist Thomas De Quincey, Shakespeare, philosophers Heraclitus and Plutarch, Cain of the Old Testament, dramatist George Bernard Shaw, author C.S. Lewis, Zeno and Lucretius and Plato, philosopher Josiah Royce, St. Augustine, philosopher and essayist Thomas Carlyle, Platonist John Norris, Judah Abrabanel, Gemistus, Plotinus, theologians Malebranche, Johannes Eckhart, F. H. Bradley, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Parmenides and Anaxagoras, philosophers Alexander Campbell Fraser and Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, philosophers Hermann Lotze and Boethius, physician and philosopher Sextus Empiricus, priest and poet Angelus Silesius, Chuang Tzu, scientist, and philosopher, theologian and mystic Emmanuel Swedenborg. Borges’s erudition as a working librarian and scholar, poet and fabulist, is impressive. Borges referenced in his decades of writing fiction and nonfiction a vast number of thinkers and literary artists.

As might be expected from an accomplished poet, Borges language could also be very lyrical, as when, summarizing his concluding assessment at the end of “A New Refutation of Time,” he writes, “Time is the substance of which I am made. Time is a river that sweeps me along, but I am the river; it is a tiger that mangles me, but I am the tiger; it is a fire that consumes me, but I am the fire. The world, unfortunately, is real; I, unfortunately, am Borges” (Selected Non-fictions 332).

Borges noted that he placed a refutation of time in every book he wrote (Selected Non-fictions 318), and he brings forth Berkeley’s argument that nothing, no object, exists outside of the human mind perceiving it, except that when no human individual perceives an object, God still does. Borges considers both Berkeley and
Schopenhauer to be idealistic thinkers, and he notes that both Berkeley and Hume, each in his own way, affirmed the existence of time. Exactly what about time Borges refutes emerges in his essay; essentially he denies “in a large number of cases” temporal succession and simultaneity (322). Finally in “A New Refutation of Time,” Borges quotes Schopenhauer that the present, not the future or the past, is “the form of all life” (331). As is often the case when it comes to philosophy, and in spite of some minor differences in a given context, Borges agrees in general with Schopenhauer’s orientation to time, and quotes him at length in his essay:

We can compare time to an endlessly turning circle: the constantly falling half would be the past, the one constantly arising the future, but on top, the indivisible point touched by the tangent would be unextended present. Just as the tangent does not roll on with the circle, neither does the present, the point of contact between the object, whose form is time, and the subject, which has no form because it does not belong among objects of possible cognition, but is a condition of all objects of possible cognition. Or: time is like a ceaseless stream and the present like a rock on which it breaks, but does not sweep along with it (Schopenhauer, *WWP I*, 331).

It is worth considering if Schopenhauer’s “endlessly turning circle” raises another point. Does Borges subscribe to a cyclical version of time? He definitely investigates this idea, rejecting the Nietschian notion of cyclical time and eventually seeming to prefer another version: “Finally, we arrive at the third and least threatening version of this doctrine: the view that there is a repetition of similar but
not identical cycles. It is Borges’s favorite version and he cites several formulations” (Bossart 105).

Santiago Colás, after noting in “The Difference that Time Makes: Hopelessness and Potency in Borges’s ‘El Alep’” that Borges, famous for his economy, wrote a single sentence two pages long. Colás, pointing out that the narrator (called “Borges” in “The Aleph”) is obsessed with his unrequited beloved Beatriz Viterbo to the point that he repeats the name “Beatriz” seven times in seven sentences, writes, “We have then, right from the beginning of ‘Borges’s description, the experience of time as a problem along with a proposed solution: resistance to time through repetition” (88). Colás goes on to describe “Borges” meetings with Beatriz’s cousin, Carlos Argentino Daneiri, who also has found time a problem, and whose home holds the Aleph. A paragraph in Colás’s essay is worth repeating here, because it says much about Borges the writer who has invented a fable told by the narrator “Borges”:

The Aleph is a sphere, two or three centimeters in diameter. It contains everything in the universe seen from every point of view, simultaneously, “without transparency and without superposition.” And it is under a staircase in Carolos Argentino Daneri’s basement. Daneri apparently discovered the Aleph as a child and returned frequently to savor its dizzying perspectives. As an adult, however, he has taken to composing a poem, which he calls “The Earth,” recoding his visions. Already in this fact we can see something of our narrator’s own aversion to time in this enterprise. To capture the Aleph via the
word, via the poetic representation, is an extended version of the narrator’s own project of repeating the name Beatriz not only as a way of remembering, but as a way equally of preserving abstract identity in the face of the difference time makes (89).

Colás also brings up memory, a topic intimately related to time.

**Borges and the Numinous**

Given Borges’s self-description of being an agnostic, his interest in mysticism and spirituality, or what is described here as the numinous, seems contradictory. However, Borges’s interest in the numinous is reflected in his first visit to Japan in 1979, during which Borges met with and questioned both Buddhist and Shinto monks and nuns, and visited various sacred and monastic sites in Kyoto and elsewhere in Japan. Although deeply affected by his encounter with Japanese spirituality, Borges did not automatically become a religious believer. It has been noted that “the visit to Japan, therefore, did not resolve Borges’s spiritual yearnings, but what it did was to awaken him to a new consciousness of a numinous reality beyond the self, and Shintoism, specifically, acted as a catalyst for the elaboration of what we might call an ‘agnostic mysticism’ of his own, for its accommodating mysteries allowed for a reconciliation of metaphysical perplexity with a kind of religious awe” (Williamson 446). That Williamson directly acknowledges Borges connection to “a new consciousness of a numinous reality beyond the self” (446) is relevant here, and it is not surprising that Borges might be seen as an agnostic mystic, given some of his preferences, such as his lifelong appreciation for Arthur Schopenhauer, whose philosophy is described here as a type of spiritual atheism.
Noting Borges’s interest in mysticism points to a subtopic throughout this study, namely the challenge of explicating and discussing in a philosophical context the association writers, artists, and thinkers have with what seems to be ineffable and thus beyond explication. While topics such as intuitive understanding, spiritual consciousness, subjective mystical experiences, self-transcendence are approached herein via the concept of numinous presence, this remains a thematic territory infrequently seen in objective scholarship. Thus this thematic territory often is either excluded or marginalized in philosophy. Nonetheless, Borges was keenly interested in this marginalized territory, despite his cautionary and somewhat ambivalent orientation. For instance, Borges’s interest in Emanuel Swedenborg, the Swedish Christian theological, philosopher, scientist, and mystic has been well-documented.\textsuperscript{183} This spirited interest in the numinous was not unique to Borges or an isolated phenomenon. Besides Borges, Swedenborg’s writings attracted the attention of Immanuel Kant, William Blake, Henry James, William James, James Joyce, W.B. Yeats, and many other well-known literary and philosophical figures (Lang 196). In spite of this widespread and documented interest in mysticism among many prominent thinkers and writers, however, Borges himself remained ambivalent about mysticism, aligning himself more with Arthur Schopenhauer’s spiritual atheistic orientation than that of a religious believer.

It should be noted that ambivalence towards the numinous and so-called mysticism has been a widespread phenomenon throughout intellectual history, but especially in modern philosophy. Most philosophers have avoided serious studies of mysticism, as well as—except for theological studies—esoteric spirituality. Creative
writers and artists, however, have had the advantage of their own literary and visual artmaking aesthetics to explore what seemingly cannot be seen or heard, except through a dynamic of wonder. Borges, for example, emphasized that his agnosticism openly allowed wonder, thus opening consciousness to all possibilities: “Being an agnostic means all things are possible, even God, even the Holy Trinity. This world is so strange that anything may happen, or may not happen. Being an agnostic makes me live in a larger, a more fantastic kind of world, almost uncanny. It makes me more tolerant” (Shenker 3).

At least some of Borges’s philosophy is rooted in Schopenhauer: “It is the Schopenhauerian principle in Borges which makes him wonder what is real and what is illusory in our common experience. And it is this which makes him deliberately blur the borderline be-tween his fiction and his essays: as if in order to imitate nature he blurs the boundary between reality and dream” (Agassi 288).

Borges joins with Schopenhauer in rejecting the possibility of philosophically validating the mystical experience because of its resistance to conceptual renderings, which is to say its ineffable, invisible and thus unverifiable nature. This ambivalent approach in Borges and Schopenhauer to mystical experience and the numinous has been recognized by others:

Schopenhauer, whom Borges acclaimed as the most lucid and sound of all philosophers, argued that mysticism is the origin and also the culmination of all religion, but that, unlike James’s suggest of noetic value, no knowledge is to be derived from the ecstatic mystical state. Indeed, argued Schopenhauer in *The World as Will and Representation*
(a book of which Borges was particularly fond), mysticism opposes philosophy and cannot constitute a pathway to knowledge owing its inherently subjective rather than objective relationship with the individual (Lang 99).

Whether one agrees or disagrees with this assessment of Schopenhauer and Borges, it should be noted that ambivalence towards the numinous and so-called mysticism and even the common experience of wonder has been a widespread phenomenon throughout intellectual history, but especially in modern western philosophy. Most philosophers have avoided serious studies of mystical experience, as well as—except for theological studies—esoteric spirituality.

**Varo as Artist-Philosopher**

Some of what can be said about Borges can be said, with some revisions, for Varo. Varo also never described herself as a philosopher per se. In fact, she felt unqualified to enter into the intellectual and philosophical conversations of other surrealist artists when she lived in Paris before moving to Mexico (Kaplan 55-57). Part of Varo’s reluctance was undoubtedly related to the exclusion of women, or at least the uninspected or openly acknowledged male dismissal of art made by women, that was characteristic of that era (Kaplan 57), but another aspect of this issue is that Varo was simply not a conventional thinker. While the influence of associating with the surrealists in Paris and Marseilles during that time was a powerful factor in her life, Varo would eventually after moving to Mexico feel free to cultivate her own subjective and highly individualistic artistic and philosophical orientation, including her specific thematic preferences and aesthetic motifs.
Another aspect of her unconventional orientation is that Varo, like many painters, is a visual thinker. Nonetheless, Varo is also a storyteller, a feature her paintings accentuate. Almost every painting announces and presents a story, and again, as is with Borges and his readers, it is the viewer who appropriates and completes her visual fable. An unusual thinker and dreamer, her sense of journey, quest, narrative incident, and other references and revelations are inherent in her visual work, just as they are in Borges’s written work.

Varo’s 1956 painting *Discovery (Hallazgo)* reveals themes repeatedly expressed in many of her paintings: journey, search and encounter, fabulist mystery, and revelation. Ultimately Varo is attempting to present the phenomenon of self-transcendence, or the revelation of what is greater than the object. Her comments on this painting echo those themes:

After lengthy comings and goings, these travelers have finally found a sort of thick pearl in the little woods in the background; the small luminous sphere, or pearl, represents inner harmony, and the travellers stand for persons attempting to gain access to a higher spiritual level (Ovalle and Gruen 112).

*[Esos viajeros después de mucho ir y venir encuentran por fin esa especie de perla gruesa en el bosquecillo al fondo; esa esferita luminiosa or perla representa la unidad interior, los viajeros representan gentes que buscan llegar a un nivel más alto espiritual.]  

Fig. 37. Remedios Varo. *Discovery (Hallazgo)*. 1956. Oil on Masonite. 78 x 69 cm. Private Collection.

It is worth considering, in Husserlian terms, how these themes appear. A river boat with human crew is re-presented from the imagination of the artist or given in
consciousness. It is not, as in a documentary, that a “real” boat is represented in the painting. The boat is imaginary, which is why it is re-presented rather than presented directly as a boat. Intentionality surfaces in both the artist who made the painting and the viewer receiving the painting—both must receive or “intuit” the object of the painting and necessarily the content of the painting. Again, a performance-assisted subjective process remains central to understanding Varo’s paintings.

Here one might note, given some of the travels in Varo’s life, that imagination is never far from memory of actual events. For instance, during Varo’s 1947-1949 stay in Venezuela, she did explore with her boyfriend of that time, Jean Nicolle, the region between the Orinoco River and the Andes mountain range that contained an intricate network of slow-moving rivers (Kaplan 114-115).

The boat in *Discovery* is re-presented against the mystery of woods, so that the viewer necessarily must intuit (a Husserlian term for receiving the presentation or re-presentation of an appearance of an object “given” in consciousness). One might argue that by receiving or intuiting everything in this painting, the viewer necessarily receives or intuits the object, the woods with all its qualities.

Varo’s interests in mystery and mystical revelations of mystery are made abundantly clear through her paintings and correspondence. She translated those interests at times into philosophical ideas and themes—spatial and temporal issues, ontological and phenomenological topics, and questions about reality and the validity of subject-object dichotomies. Thus while Varo was only somewhat interested in the ideas of mainstream western philosophy, she was very interested in an expansive array of Western and Eastern ideas most frequently, and sometimes erroneously,
described as mystical or occult. Such ideas are only infrequently explicated by either analytic or continental philosophy. Her interests included the writings of C.G. Jung, G. I. Gurdjieff, P.D. Ouspensky, Helena Blavatsky, and Meister Eckhart, as well as themes such as Sufism, the I-Ching, alchemy, sacred geometry, and the legendary Holy Grail.

As already addressed in Chapter Four, the fact that these themes attracted many modernist artists—from Wassily Kandinsky to Hilma af Klint to Jackson Pollock to Agnes Martin to Brice Marsden and even some contemporary artists—is well known, even if sometimes discounted, ignored or avoided by some contemporary art historians and art scholars. Varo was far from the first modern artist to demonstrate interest in the numinous even when perceived via its various mystical and magical appearances.

As discussed earlier in regards to Husserl himself, it makes sense when applying a Husserlian methodology to the work of these two artists to first consider their engagement of subjectivity.

**Varo and Subjectivity**
Fig. 38. Remedios Varo. *Vagabond* (*Vagabundo*) 1957.
Oil on Masonite, 22 x 10 5/8 in. private collection.
Remedios Varo also deals with the self in her work, albeit in ways distinct from Borges’s poems and writings. Her paintings often reflect fragmented versions of herself, and especially express her seeking to understand herself and her life as an artist as a journey. Varo painted many versions of herself, but what those versions have in common are a sensibility of seeking the numinous. Her “selves” are all seekers. Her self-portraits reflect a highly imaginary variety of selves.

Janet Kaplan’s excellent *Remedios Varo: Unexpected Journeys* introduced the work of this remarkable artist to the English-speaking world in 2000. As Kaplan points out, Varo’s explorations of self and knowing are also often expressed in what seems to be self-portraits:

Varo did not paint self-portraits in the traditional sense. She did not seek to render a naturalistic likeness after careful scrutiny of the mirror. Her work is filled with self-portrait characters, but they are abstracted, metaphoric, ironic. Placed in a variety of situations—some related to her life experience, others purely invented—they become symbolic equivalents of the artist herself. Even if one does not know the details of Varo’s physiognomy, there is a quality of self-absorption that soon communicates the sense that the work is autobiographical. Like an actress taking on roles, Varo consistently used these self-portrait characters as a way to explore alternative identities, both personal and universal, in a style that quickly became her signature (Kaplan, *Unexpected*, 147).

In comments addressed to her brother, Dr. Rodrigo Varo, Remedios Varo did
comment on some her paintings, including *Vagabond* (fig. 35):

I think this painting is one of my best. Here is a design for a vagabond’s clothing, but in this case the vagabond is not liberated. It’s a very practical and comfortable suit. As a means of locomotion it has front-wheel drive; by lifting his walking stick he can come to a halt. The garment can be sealed hermetically at night, and has a little door that can be locked. Some parts of the garment are made of wood but, as I said, the man is not liberated. On one side of the suit is a niche which serves as a living room. There you will find a portrait hanging and three books. On his breast he is wearing a flowerpot with a rose growing in it, a more select and exquisite plant than the ones he encounters in these woods. But he needs the portrait, the rose (symbolizing nostalgia for a little garden in a real house) and his cat; he isn’t really free (Ovalle 115).  

Here it is useful to note Varo’s *physical* orientation to mystical themes. She invariably describes the physical or visible elements of a given painting even though she is attempting to depict or reveal themes that accentuate the ineffable and invisible.

Kaplan suggests that there is an autobiographical element to this painting:

“Perhaps the vagabond is emblematic of Varo herself. Although she left France for Mexico with only what she could carry, she, too, found it difficult to free herself from the past” (Kaplan, *Unexpected*, 151).
Swinford then compares Bosch’s painting to Varo’s *The Juggler* (fig. 36) as an example of what he describes as a modern allegorical system (181):

In *The Juggler*, Varo creates a personal allegorical system which relies on the predetermined symbols of Christian and classical iconography. But these are quickly refigured into a personal system informed by the scientific and organized like a machine. The work features a host of symbols familiar from Christian iconography and demonology: the lion, the owl, the goat, the pentacle-shaped juxtaposition of the juggler’s magician hat and eerily forked facial hair. But this system is
disrupted by personal symbols which recur throughout Varo’s work.

Who is the girl in the juggler’s cart? Why the horde of identical observers wrapped in a single cloak? In the irreal work, allegory operates according to an altered, but constant and orderly iconographic system (181-182).

Swinford also references a comment from Octavio Paz, who noted that Varo is painting a mirror-image—“Not the world in reverse, but the reverse of the world” (182).\(^{186}\) Paz’s assessment affirms Varo’s work and allows her to be the agency she is, an artist working in the margins of conventional aesthetics. Varo is not affirming the world as it appears; she is confirming a kind of reversal of how the world appears in that she is signaling the existence (and radical significance) of a seemingly invisible, ineffable numinous gate.

Applying a Husserlian orientation to The Juggler, if the so-called juggler or magician is understood to be re-presenting an action as object (the juggling), this re-presentation echoes a larger contextual representation within which the juggler acts. A phenomenological layered appearance necessarily arises in consciousness; the audience is receiving the givenness of the juggler’s activated object, itself an irreal re-presentation occurring within a broader irreal re-presentation. The layers of imagination in a Varo painting echo’s the multifarious possibilities of a irreal fabulism inherent in Varo’s work altogether. Since a viewer must enter Varo’s world as depicted in her paintings, the viewer too must account for layers or stages of re-presentation. To some extent, this accounts for uniqueness of Varo’s style of surrealist imagery wherein a Varo painting is not simply a depiction of symbols and
unconsciousness, but a world that includes both the “real” world and the “phantasy” or imagined world, but also includes an imaginary world within imaginary settings rooted in a previously imagined world. One world leads into another world, depending on to what extent or depth of layering the intentionality of the artist (and viewer) expresses aesthetically. The point is that a Varo painting, while meticulously composed, is not static or “completed” in a fixed sense; it is a challenge for a viewer not to imagine what happens next in a Varo composition. That action leads to action, and that layer uncovers layer, is alive in Varo’s artist-philosopher dynamic. It is literally a dynamic via her art itself. Varo is inquiring into a given appearance, that inquiry or artistic intentionality eventually opens the numinous gate the artist senses and is seeking. Varo’s art is a search to locate the numinous.

The artist’s description of The Juggler is much simpler, yet her description is more of a pointing towards a territory the magician himself is pointing towards:

The painting is about a magician full of tricks, color, and life. In his covered wagon he has all sorts of marvelous things and animals; before him is a uniform “mass” of beings. So that is even more evident that they are a mass, they wear a collective cloak, an enormous piece of gray fabric with holes for their heads. They all look alike, have the same hair, et cetera (Ovalle 113).

[Se trata de un prestidigitador, está lleno de trucos, de color, de vida, en el carricoche lleva toda clase de cosas milagrosas y animales, ante él está la “masa”; para que sea más “masa” hasta llevan un traje]
Varo and the Temporal-Spatial Theme

Varo also often depicts human confrontations with the fluid nature of time.

Fig. 40. Remedios Varo. *Creation of the Birds* (*Creación de las aves*), 1957.
Oil on Masonite, 20 15/8 x 24 5/8 in., Private Collection

Almost every Varo painting can be understood as a fable. Admittedly this is only one of several approaches to her art, but there are numerous aspects of a Varo painting that are fabulist in tone and content. Relative to nonhuman species, one the most famous of her paintings is *Creation of the Birds* (fig. 40). In that painting a human with an owlish humanoid-bird appearance herself sits at table or desk
“painting” birds that fly away once created. Her brush is musically inspired in that it
is attached by a line to a violin that hangs from her neck; simultaneously the artist
holds up a triangular magnifying glass that intensifies the light shining through a
window of a bright star in the deep space of the night. A contraption stands next to
her desk. It appears to be scientific device of some sort with three extended tube-
fingers that deposit different colored paint on the artist’s palette.

Is this a depiction of divine creation? That description seems inaccurate. A
more accurate summary would be that the painting depicts an inspired work of art,
one inspired both externally by the phenomenal universe and internally by the artist’s
imagination. It is a work that acknowledges or counters the illusion of subject-object
dichotomy that separates humans from other species. The magnified starlight, musical
paint brush, and the mysterious dispenser of paints, laboratorial like in appearance, do
not necessarily mean God or a supreme being creates art or even life, but that the
creative process and art itself can be inspired and to some extent accomplished within
the mystery of infinity. The laboratory or a room of active investigation does appear
regularly in Varo paintings. Varo was attracted to science but also frustrated with
what she perceived to be the limitations of how scientific evidence is perceived and
validated. If quantum mechanics had surfaced during her lifetime, she might have
utilized those theories in art.
In this painting, *Weaving of Space and Time*, Varo, as she often does, includes machinery. The woman’s legs are a wheel, and her torso includes meshed gears, but much more is depicted. A clock appears between the man with a lily and the woman with a candle. Inner and outer space are inside a woven cloth or perhaps a basket.
Tere Arcq writes at length about this painting, referencing Varo’s intense interest in P.D. Ouspensky and the fourth dimension:

Everything seems to be stretched and prolonged along a timeline: past, present and future are one and the same. Kant established the fact that everything that the senses perceive is perceived in terms of time and space. In other words, extension in space and existence in time are not inherent properties of things, but rather properties of our sensorial perception: they are categories of our reasoning. [...] *Weaving of Space and Time* is an interesting attempt to encapsulate Ouspensky’s vision, to represent how a mind that escapes the limitations of the senses’ perception can be elevated to another plane and see the past, present and future coexist simultaneously, “beyond the limits of the circle enlightened by our usual consciousness” (Arcq 76-77).^187

It should be noted here that the explication of meaning in Varo’s metaphorically rich paintings can almost always go down any of several interpretative paths, depending on the elements or features being accentuated by a given writer. An example would be the next two paintings.
Fig. 42. Remedios Varo. *Un submissive Plant (Planta insumisa)* 1961. Oil on Masonite, 33 x 24 5/8 in. Private Collection.

It is interesting to first hear Varo’s comments before other interpretations:
This scientist is experimenting with different plants and vegetables. He is somewhat bewildered because there is an unruly plant. All the plants are growing shoots in the form of mathematical figures and formulas, except for one that insists on producing a flower. And the only mathematical branch it sprouted at the beginning, which drops onto the table, is very withered and weak and besides, is mistaken, for it says “two plus two is almost four.” Each hair on the scientist’s head is a mathematical equation (Ovalle 120).

Janet Kaplan, whose excellent Remedios Varo: Unexpected Journeys introduced the work of this remarkable artist to the English-speaking world in 2000, discusses the flower in Discovery of a Mutant Geologist (fig. 43) in another context by first considering Unsubmissive Plant (fig. 42):

Unsubmissive Plant presents Varo’s mixed feelings about scientific study in a succinctly ironic image. Science, in this case botany, seeks to understand nature through abstraction but grows greedy for control and, in the process of controlling, is alienated from the very nature that was its starting point. Varo offered the ultimate results of such abstraction in Discovery of a Mutant Geologist (fig. 43). Another scientist, with even more elaborate equipment, carefully studies an unnaturally large flower, the only sign of life in a barren landscape.
denuded by the radiation of an atomic bomb. Studying intently, he is unaware that he, too, has mutated, sprouting the winds of an insect and

Fig. 43. Remedios Varo. *Discovery of a Mutant Geologist* (*Descubrimiento de un geólogo mutante*) 1955. Oil on Masonite, 30 x 20 in. Richard J. Woods.
the tail of a raccoon. It is noteworthy that in areas closest to the bomb sites, in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, where all forms of life had been immediately destroyed, it was documented that within days of the blast there were violent eruptions of abnormal plant growth, causing fields of lush flowers to spring up overnight. It is not known if Varo’s image of the gigantic flower referred to that fact or if she simply intuited the possibility (173-174).

Varo’s description of this painting is more succinct: “In a landscape devastated by an atomic bomb, a geologist—who has mutated because of the radiation—is examining a gigantic flower. The geologist is carrying a very interesting piece of laboratory equipment” (Ovalle 120).

**Varo and the Numinous**

The paintings of Remedios Varo reveal a visual orientation to the numinous via compositional representation, creating a reality that allows visual contextual representations of mysterious and magical figures and occurrences. Whereas Borges’s short stories often reflect a philosophical playfulness that challenges conventional presuppositions about reality and self-identification, as well as spatial-temporal presuppositions, Varo’s paintings express a transformative process through themes of journey, doorways, and the disintegration of conventional self-identification. This last theme is not uncommon in surrealist art, but with Varo’s work there is often a sense of action and search. In the 1950’s in Mexico Varo began to extend her work beyond her earlier experiments influenced by her association with Surrealism and the Paris group of artists led by Andre Breton. Her paintings more and more assumed a unique
aesthetic, as described here by Alberto Ruy Sánchez:

Remedios Varo’s fascinating body of work appears to us as a revelation and a mystery at one and the same time. A revelation so compelling that its aesthetic power has caused her name to be inscribed in the annals of the greatest and most disconcerting accomplishments of modern art. It is impossible to remain indifferent before the meticulous brushwork and incessant imagination seen in her paintings (Sánchez 14).

Sánchez goes on to describe four paradoxes that intensify Varo’s painting skills and magnify the imaginative imagery alive in her paintings: (1) a strong formal language that “espouses a profoundly delirious discourse” and “scrupulous logic of nonsense”; (2) a “technically pure academic background” combined with a “primitive palpitation” of details that “approaching innocence or naïveté”; (3) the “precise geometry” of her compositions, albeit with “lines and motifs of equal delicacy and clear fragility”; and (4) the “finished thought” concluding a quest combined with a simultaneous “yearning for an open and constant search” (Sánchez 14).

However, as noted earlier, the approach herein is not to examine the occult per se, although the varieties of occultism, magic, mysticism, and related topics surface from time to time within the philosophical and aesthetic themes of the study.

**Summary Review of Varo’s Paintings**

Attempting to categorize the work of Remedios Varo undermines that work. Calling her art irreal fabulism, while not inaccurate, is ultimately an inadequate description. One can assign descriptive labels to both Varo and Borges, but in both
cases arbitrary, historically rooted classifications quickly reach inherent limitations; using established means of describing Varo’s paintings becomes the metaphor of looking at a closely passing elephant through a tiny viewing hole. What can be seen of the whole work? This is one reason why art writers and scholars has proposed multifarious interpretations of her work. The visual details of a Varo painting much extend the narrative or storytelling aspects of most surrealistic art. Her paintings are more than depictions of the unconscious and more than the state dream consciousness, though both factors represent relevant elements. The key to work is found more in the fabulist destination being presented. The revelation of ontological and spiritual purpose beyond characteristics of journey and search are first sensed and then revealed in the details of a Varo painting. In other words, the entertaining and playful attractiveness of a Varo painting only signals another purpose.

If the purpose of art is, as Varo asserted, to communicate the incommunicable, is that accomplished in her art? Visually, Varo’s irreal fabulism transports the viewer to what is called here the numinous gate. Varo repeatedly leaves the viewer standing in front of that gate, looking over the gate, so to speak, and left in the most advantageous location for pushing open that gate.

Can that so-called numinous gate even be pushed open. It’s not clear that one can open push open a gate merely through volitional energy; it is almost as if the gate must open itself. The proposal here is that no work of art is completed until the performance-assisted subjective process is completed, so that the artist and viewer, or writer and reader, are merged in a sensibility to this numinous gate and its inherent
spiritual revelation. Essentially that revelation is rooted in a sensibility to prior unity that in itself allows revelation of prior unity and what is seemingly incommunicable.

This is not a seamlessly perfect approach to discovering ultimate reality. Varo had her doubts; in fact, doubt is a rich means that must be allowed and utilized in any process of revelation of truth or reality. Varo both uses and dismisses scientific “fact.” She both accepts and glorifies, while also refusing and reshaping, for example, the physical appearance of the human being. Varo combines mechanical and fleshy elements in her fabulism. Sometimes a human subject is multiplied as a plurality of intersubjective awareness, at other times a kind of subjective solitude permeates a compositional scene.

A primary point is that Varo’s irreal fabulism is almost invariably a story about a search for what is hear described as the numinous gate. One of many paintings that illustrate this is Varo’s 1962 *Spiral Transit (Tránsito en espiral)* (fig. 44).

Kaplan notes about this painting that the travelers “are embarked on a journey beyond the realm of mere navigations” (169), and that “theirs is a spiritual voyage…” (169). Luis-Martin Lozano also offers—quoted at length because its summary insight—commentary that unravels Varo’s broader purpose in this and other paintings:

In addition, the iconographic exploration would help to understand the permanent metaphysical quest within the dimensionality of her painting. Either the characters she paints acquire a platonic attitude of meditation and explore within themselves, or they advance in a
continuous and frantic exploration that leads them to climb analogous mountains, to submerge themselves in murky, back world waters, tireless travelers reaching the miasmas of the Orinoco River in search of the primal origin of all oracles; where it will be commonplace to encounter sailors who cross over into hidden dimensions, making use of fantastic means of locomotion to travel winding roads and labyrinthine canals; always furtive, they will discover the secret passages in the walls and cathedrals, seeking answers to the mysteries of the universe. This is well illustrated in one of the key paintings by Remedios Varo: *Spiral Transit*, of 1962, a work conceived as a microcosm surrounded by its own sea and celestial vault, in the manner of the Flemish panels of Hieronymus Bosch (Ovalle 71).

Lozano’s comments acknowledge the journey theme in Varo, the secret passages in her paintings, the combination of inner self and outer search. I would add that an aesthetic quality pervades Varo’s work, a quality of mystery that directly points to spiritual search and revelation, as it does, for example, in Alejandro Jodorowsky’s film *El Topo*, among other modern works of art. This film, as Ben Cobb emphasizes, reflects elements from *The Bhagavad Gita*, Sufi mysticism, and (like Varo’s work) the work of G.I. Gurdjieff (Cobb 71).

Varo uses storytelling in the form of irreal fabulism to show search and journey, as well as qualities common to travel: points of anonymity, playful attraction to what does not seem to be knowable, nonrecognition combined with recognition of
stereotypes, plasticity of appearance in the midst of mystery—all of this continually arising within a world of wonder.

Fig. 44. Remedios Varo. *Spiral Transit (Tránsito en espiral)*, 1962. Oil on Masonite, 39 3/8 x 45 ¼ in. Private collection.

**Wonder in Varo and Borges**

Wonder is one of the keys to understanding the philosophical implications of both Borges and Varo’s artistic creations. There are very few Remedios Varo paintings that do not reflect a sensibility of and orientation to wonder, as well as a visual orientation to the numinous via compositional representation rooted in irreal
fabulism. As emphasized in her commentary about the clockmaker in her painting *Revelation or The Clockmaker* (figs. 32-34), wonder is a key element for Varo: “I have tried to make him look both astonished and enlightened” (Ovalle 111).

Her paintings create a reality that allows visual contextual representations of mysterious and magical figures and occurrences. Whereas Borges’s short stories often reflect, as noted previously, a philosophical playfulness that challenges conventional presuppositions about reality and self-identification, as well as spatial-temporal presuppositions, Varo’s paintings express a transformative process through themes of journey, doorways, and the disintegration of conventional self-identification. This last theme is not uncommon in surrealist art, but with Varo’s work there is often a sense of action and search. In the 1950’s in Mexico Varo began to extend her work beyond her earlier experiments influenced by her association with Surrealism and the Paris group of artists led by Andre Breton. Her paintings more and more assumed a unique aesthetic. As with many creative thinkers, there is a continual interest in the role of the ineffable in both Varo and Borges.

Shiomy Mualem, contrasting Wittgenstein’s emphasis that philosophy is essentially about elucidations that clarify cloudy and indistinct thoughts, notes that “Borges assumes the opposite: the act of making reality somewhat cloudy turns our attention toward philosophical quests, since it evokes in us the initial amazement; philosophy begins in wonder” (76). Wonder is, in fact, one of the keys to understanding the philosophical implications of both Borges and Varo’s artistic visions. In some ways, what is very beautiful about art in comparison to philosophy, which by the way can also be beautiful, is that art can show and not just tell.
Although with Varo and Borges this gap is considerably reduced in light of their storytelling fabulist artistic orientations, there nonetheless remains a contrast between art and philosophy— the making of things and the thinking about everything, although one could also argue that thinking is likewise a form of making. That Borges so resonated with Schopenhauerian thought undermines Borges’s claims to not being a philosopher. Art and philosophy are like two great streams flowing into each other and creating an even greater river that flows to a seemingly endless sea. And indeed, art and philosophy each have many tributaries that feed both their respective streams as well as that single combined river.

**Borges and Varo in the Margins**

If Borges allows wonder to summon up an eternal universe only sensed at the margins of logical thought, wonder also allows Varo to open a doorway in her art that reveals what cannot be seen but imagined. Both of these artists render the invisibility of infinity visible through their fabulist art, however strange or illogical their art may seem in a world that naively claims to make the world linear and fixed. In some sense, they do more than straddle a line between real and irreal—they change and cross that line, working in the margins of reality, in that area that is presupposed to be invisible and inaccessible.
Conclusion—The Numinous Gate

As acknowledged in the introduction, this study makes no claim to explicating nicely packaged explications or definitions of philosophical truth and reality. The central proposal of this study has been that Remedios Varo and Jorge Luis Borges attempt to communicate the numinous in their art, as have many other modern artists, including modernist, postmodernist, and contemporary artists. That the numinous is immersed in consciousness and appears or is felt as consciousness, and yet remains apparently incommunicable via rational thought and linear concepts, has been the central issue being addressed here. The major challenge has been to undertake this investigation in philosophical and phenomenological, or as expressed earlier, in philosophico-phenomenological fashion rather than proposing a theological or other belief system exclusivity.

Since the “numinous gate” in the title is a metaphorical entranceway into experiencing the numinous in consciousness, a gateway opened via a state of wonder and awe, the complex thematic conundrum of the study has continually surfaced. What is a conundrum and what is that conundrum in the present context? Again, the definition of a conundrum applicable here is: “Any puzzling question or problem; an enigmatical statement” (“conundrum, n., 4.b.”). More specifically the conundrum here pivots around communicating what seems to be incommunicable yet does exist. The existence of the numinous, for the most part, remains a mystery that can only be sensed or “felt,” yet does in some circumstances become becomes temporarily visible and capable of being directly experienced.
Thus the issue has been to explicate in philosophico-phenomenological terms how these two artists, among many other modern artists, acknowledge a sensibility to the numinous and to attempt, through their respective creative processes, to express the numinous through their art. Obviously, this is not a simple issue. Sometimes what the artist actually communicates is his or her search for the numinous, or that artist’s sensibility to the numinous, or even that artist’s own doubt about and challenges to expressing or revealing the numinous in his or her art.

For example, and as explored already, even though Varo’s paintings do express mystical and magical elements, she is not literally a mystic or magician (although her art has been described as “magical”), but an artist very much aware of and capable of confronting the conventional limitations of rational thought:

Personally, I do not think I am endowed with special powers, but rather an ability to quickly see the relationship between cause and effect beyond the current limits of ordinary logic”

(Personalmente, yo no me creo dotada de poderes especiales, sino más bien de una capacidad para ver rápidamente las relaciones de causa a efecto, y ello fuera de los límites ordinaries de la lógica corriente) (Cartas 81-82). 188

On the other hand, and as stated throughout this investigation, the fabulist literary art of Borges communicates through his art a sensibility to the numinous more through an intertextual layering and philosophically accented narratology.

In a sense, it is the nature of the numinous, and the search for it, that creates the artist-philosopher dynamic in Borges and Varo. Both the fabulist, irreal paintings
of Varo and the fabulist, irreal stories of Borges are more than visual and literary storytelling. As proposed earlier, a primary focus is on the sensibility to the numinous that these two artists—and many other modern artists, as well—express, a sensibility that fuels and shapes their artistic attempts to excavate and make visible the numinous via image consciousness.

How can this occur? Often it is wonder that initiates a dynamic rupture in consciousness that acts as the hinge allowing the numinous gate proposed herein to become visible and to swing open. In other words, wonder expressed through the art itself—as visible and communicable expressions of the artists’ sensibility to the numinous—becomes that numinous gateway in consciousness.

Nor is this simply a description of someone making and presenting art to “the other.” The conjunction of the artist with the viewer or reader is a completion of the work of art, allowing that metaphorical gateway or entranceway into the numinous to become the reality that was previously only sensed, felt, or intuited. This naturally brings up subjectivity, intersubjectivity, and the concept of self, topics that have been considered throughout, leading especially to the assertion that art is an intersubjective phenomenon, and that the idea of a separative self-identified self is itself at best only a partially valid notion in the sense of being an incomplete idea. This is reflected in part in Husserl’s work to extend and revise Cartesian theory.

This study has considered many relevant concepts and factors to assist in clarifying and authenticating its central theme, including Husserlian transcendental phenomenology, the Schopenhauerian aesthetic, wonder and self-forgetting, not-knowing or unknowing, and other ideas and writings. The writings of both
Schopenhauer and Husserl provided some functional and conceptual means for serving the excavation of the numinous within a larger context of perception that includes the seeing of all “things.” In the present context, if there is an answer or solution to the question inherent in the thematic conundrum of communicating the incommunicable, that solution is art. In other words, what is proposed and argued is that art can be a means to make visible the invisibility of the numinous.

Husserl’s epochē is an essential means for magnifying a focus that can penetrate the ephemeral and ineffable nature of the numinous. Because the epochē brackets out presuppositions, preconceptions, and prejudices that could obstruct the investigation and appearance of the numinous gate, a more direct and vivid vision becomes possible, one that can allows a shift in consciousness that ushers in a visibility of the numinous beyond a felt sensibility to it. Specifically with Varo and Borges, when the artist allows an intentionality of reception of appearance, or receives that givenness (the appearance of an art object) in consciousness, not-knowing and self-forgetting may spontaneously accompany the reception of that appearance of a reshaped irreal object. The work of Borges and Varo, appearing as it does in the irreal fabulist context of their specific aesthetics, allows the artist to both give and receive the art object, and also allows the viewer or reader to receive that art object and its appearance as the numinous gate. Understanding Husserlian intentionality as an antecedent event, one that occurs before (and sometimes simultaneously with) conceptually encountering the object, also leads to understanding how the intersubjective encounter takes hold as an interactive encounter between artist and viewer. In some ways, the two—artist and viewer, writer
and reader—are inseparable. It may be that nothing is as powerfully disruptive to linear temporal-spatial presuppositions as the artist-viewer synergetic conjunction.

Undertaking this topic of how art, art-making and art-viewing are related to the numinous leads to other conclusions. This is not simply a “transcendent” issue or the intervention of what creative writers have sometimes called (usually in critical terms) the God Box, where an aspect of the art suddenly just happens in miraculous terms. While there may be some legitimacy to this imaginary or visualized phenomenon, that has not been the orientation of this study. In fact, one result of the study has been to understand more clearly how non-rational aspects of the numinous arise in contextual territories, whether by alternative states of consciousness or within so-called sacred cultures, but in this context, via art. The disruptive experience of wonder that is here proposed as the hinge that allows the numinous gate to visibly swing open, is a subjective experience, even though Borges and Varo continually challenge fixed ideas of the self. Here it is useful to note again that making and viewing art is a performance-assisted subjective process (Adi Da 94) that represents an aspect of seeking the numinous. The artist-philosopher dynamic in Borges and Varo fuels their respective creative processes of their fabulist art, which involves an unrealistic interplay with subjectivity, wonder, knowledge, not-knowing, self-forgetting and so on. The proposal herein has been that while truth and reality are inherent in the numinous, they are ultimately indefinable yet not inaccessible aspects of the performance-assisted “subjective” process in art-making and art.

Proposing that the making and viewing (or reading) of art pivots around image consciousness or Bildbewusstsein (also translated as “depicting consciousness”), the
imagination (Husserlian “phantasy”), and memory, and blending that with a
multifarious array that includes the artist-philosopher dynamic, intertextualities, and
various forms of intersubjectivity, have as a whole served the elucidation of the art
and creative processes of Remedios Varo and Jorge Luis Borges.

In regards to mystery and the invisible, which is to say the numinous, part of
the purpose here has been to challenge the widespread notion that such topics are
impenetrable to scholarly investigation. To undermine philosophical investigation
with presuppositional, linear understanding is to place philosophy inside the
restrictions of a belief system rooted in scientific materialism. This study has been a
protest against that attitude, as well as a remonstration against the often unspoken and
uninspected contemporary prohibition or taboo against acknowledging that a
sensitivity to the numinous in art is a theme worthy of scholarly investigation.

Ultimately the numinous is apodictic. That is said with the caveat that simply
claiming the numinous is apodictic is insufficient. Evidence of how the numinous is
apodictic is a conclusion, but it is a partial conclusion that is challenged herein by
examining the irreal, fabulist work of the two artist-philosophers featured in the
study.

Finally, this investigation has argued that art for life’s sake is central to
Borges and Varo. The Bakhtinian carnivalesque is a strand in the writings of Borges
and paintings of Varo, one that engenders a life-positive orientation to humankind
and the art of humankind. A liberating attitude towards the humor, the grotesque, and
the carnivalesque pervades the work of Varo and Borges. Simultaneously, their work
authenticates Plato’s emphasis on wonder as “the beginning of philosophizing as a
divine phenomenon, a sort of epiphany, related to the sight of divine beauty” (Chrysakopoulou 95). That wonder is an instance of not-knowing is not as unusual as one might think; the argument herein has been that wonder is also a version of quotidian experience functioning as disruption (Gosetti-Ferencei 1).

The intention here, then, has been to navigate through what is actually one aesthetic and philosophico-phenomenological territory, albeit one that displays a great variety of features across its landscape. While it is clearly evident and has been noted before that Borges and Varo explore consciousness via their fabulist art-making, it has been less evident in the philosophy of art that their work is fueled by a sensibility to the numinous. Thus it is hoped that this study will initiate other studies similar to this theme, whether for the artist-philosophers examined here or for art and the art-making of the artist-philosopher in general.
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The distinctions among magic realism, fantasy, fabulism and other terms are examined farther ahead, as well as the reasons for choosing irreal fabulist storytelling as the narratological term of choice.

While the word “mystery” is an essential term here, it should be noted that there are theological and religious uses of the word as well as non-theological uses, and while both uses are significant in this study, several relevant uses of the word “mystery” will be explored in more detail in the chapters ahead. One non-theological definition immediately relevant is defined in the *The Oxford English Dictionary* as: “A hidden or secret thing; something inexplicable or beyond human comprehension; a person or thing evoking awe or wonder but not well known or understood; an enigma” (“mystery, n.1,” II. 5a).

The term “philosophico-phenomenological” is borrowed from Anthony Steinbock’s *Phenomenology and Mysticism: The Verticality of Religious Experience*, and will be examined more closely ahead.

In saying that art is rooted in this impulse, no claim is being made that every piece of art made throughout the history of humankind has been made via that impulse to make visible the invisibility of the numinous. Obviously art is made for all kinds of reasons. But any attempt to determine precisely what art is rooted in that impulse would be foolhardy and inaccurate. Thus the statement is not that “some art” is made via that impulse, because that adjective would be misleading and false to some degree as well. A major aspect of the thesis herein is that far more art has been and continues to be made with that impulse than has been openly acknowledged in scholarship. In some cases the artist himself or herself may be motivated unconsciously by that impulse, but to find and use those unconscious cases of seeking the numinous is not the orientation here. Through artist commentaries and art scholarship, it is clear that much modern art—modernist, postmodernist, and contemporary—has been openly rooted in a seeking for and sensibility to the numinous. This is abundantly evident in modernist art, but whatever the art history era or category, examples are used throughout this study of art-making in which a seeking for and a sensibility to the numinous are clearly and consciously evident in one way or another.

Borges writes this in his essay “Narrative Art and Magic.” The quote is also used in *The Cambridge Companion to Jorge Luis Borges*, 209.

Epochē is a seminal Husserlian concept, one that is critical to this study. As will be discussed in more detail, epochē’s central value here is that it serves to set aside uninspected presuppositions about art, reality, perception, and various additional concepts and issues that pervade (at times unconsciously) Eurocentric thought.

While the term leitmotif is generally related to music, there are other uses that signal a principle theme in other fields. See "leitmotiv, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2015. Web. 5 June 2015.

Blindness is also an important theme in Borges’s work, given that he became gradually more and more blind as he aged.
Plato attributes to Socrates numerous times in the Socratic dialogues this “not-knowing” orientation to knowledge.

The complete reference to this passage is summed up by writer and widow of Borges, Maria Kodama: “This experience is narrated in one of his [Borges] first works, ‘El idioma de los argentines’ (‘The Language of the Argentines’), from 1928, and later he included it in two more publications including “A New refutation of Time.” He referred to the experience as ‘sentirse en muerte,’ or ‘feeling in death’.


Thirteen years before the Kandinsky’s Munich incident, a minor yet seminal “not-knowing” experience initiated a root awakening to the significance of perceptual and emotional engagement of the art object: “About a year before leaving Russia he saw an exhibition of French Impressionists in Moscow, and for the first time became aware of the characteristics of modern painting. Before [i.e. before viewing] one of Claude Monet’s Haystacks, he did not recognize the object [i.e. did not “see” a haystack], missed it, but at the same time he noticed that the picture moved him deeply, becoming engraved in his memory with all its special charter.” This anecdote is in Will Grohmann’s Wassily Kandinsky: Life and Work, 32.

See especially Kandinsky’s seminal book on this topic, his 1912 Über das Geistige in der Kunst (Concerning the Spiritual in Art).

While the role of abstraction in modernist art history is not a primary theme in this study, it is a significant factor underlying any understanding wonder and the numinous in art, as will be discussed in Chapter Four.

One of the more directly relevant scholarly studies of this topic is Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei’s The Ecstatic Quotidian: Phenomenological Sightings in Modern Art and Literature.

For example, sociopolitical, conceptual, technical, and so on.

This chapter, in the pages ahead, will expand and bring more detail to the initial definition of irreal presented in the introduction, but in Chapter Six the irreal in the art of Borges and Varo will be considered in more direct detail and depth.

See, for example, Naturalizing Phenomenology: Issues in Contemporary Phenomenology and Cognitive Science, edited by Jean Petitot and others; Mind in Life: biology, Phenomenology, and the Sciences of Mind, by Evan Thompson; or The Phenomena of Awareness: Husserl, Cantor, Jung, by Cecile T. Tougas.


22 A collection of Husserl’s writings on time consciousness was published in 1928 in Husserl’s *Jarbuch*. It included a short foreword by Heidegger, who was listed as editor, but it was Edith Stein who actually gathered and organized the writings while she worked as Husserl’s assistant in 1917. This book was published in 1966 as *Zur Phänomenologie des inneren Zeitbewusstseins* (1893-1917), with an English translation published in 1991 titled *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time* (1893-1917).

23 *Phantasy, Image Consciousness, and Memory* (1898-1925) is a gathering of posthumous texts (lectures, notes, sketches) by Husserl on representational consciousness. This book more than any of Husserl’s other works, discusses art and aesthetics in regards to Husserlian transcendental phenomenology and consciousness. Also relevant to this study, as will be seen, is Husserl’s *Cartesian Mediations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*.

24 The ways in which Husserl agrees and disagrees with Descartes will become clearer as this chapter unfolds.

25 As pointed out in a translator’s note (1) to *Cartesian Mediations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, that book is an elaboration of two 1929 lectures Husserl delivered at the Sorbonne in Paris entitled “Einleitung in die transzendentale Phänomenologie” (Introduction to transcendental phenomenology).

26 Interrelated terms surface everywhere in Husserl’s methodology. Husserlian intuition (Anschauung) and givenness (Gegenbenheit), for example, together form a unitary, reciprocally cooperative activity, as do object (Objekt) and intentionality (Intentionalität).

27 Here, the emphasis is on Husserl’s later thought, after his so-called “transcendental turn.” Clearly, any thinker influenced by the work of Plato and Kant must necessarily clarify his or her own usage and meaning of the word “transcendental.”

28 Carr is referencing a section title (#53) in Husserl’s *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy* (178).


30 I refer to Husserl’s method as a methodology in the present context because “methodology” better describes how the main thrust of this study is to investigate topics related to the art of Varo and Borges, and how that is accomplished by using a methodology grounded in scientifically rigorous Husserlian transcendental phenomenology. This allows for a consistency of language and investigative concepts to be applied to Varo and Borges’s work. In other words, that specific methodology is used as the primary means to investigate their visual and literary art.

31 In all fairness, since the authors of this art history textbook are discussing Sartre’s aesthetic, and not attempting to explicate the range of Husserl’s thinking, they are emphasizing Husserl’s “intentional consciousness,” which was a starting point for
Sartre’s aesthetic, although some Husserlian scholars have noted that Husserl’s students and assistants such as Heidegger, Sartre, and Derrida did not really study Husserl’s writings and lectures closely enough or with enough depth, and did have some misunderstandings about his work. This is understandable, of course, given the vast nature and enormous range of Husserl’s work. And, as stated already, neither does this study claim to address all of Husserl’s work. It seems as if everyone picks and chooses from Husserl what is useful for their own arguments and studies.

32 This quote initially came to my attention via Dan Zahavi’s “Husserl and the absolute.”


34 This point is also referenced by A.D. Smith in The Routledge Philosophy Guide Book to Husserl and the Cartesian Meditations (20). It is also worth noting the title of the specific part of Husserl’s The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology where this issue is addressed. See Section 8 in “Part II: Clarification of the Origin of the Modern Opposition between Physicalistic Objectivism and Transcendental Subjectivism.”

35 Other scholars have argued that other principles are central or primary in Husserl’s phenomenology. Epoché, for example (see Bourne-Taylor and Mildenberg 25).

36 Some of the points in this chapter about Husserl’s rendering of imagination will be returned to in Chapter Six about the artist-philosopher dynamic.

37 Forms of consciousness are discussed numerous times in Husserl’s writings, but especially relevant here are his discussions in Logical Investigations and in Phantasy, Image Consciousness, and Memory (1898-1925).


39 See Gregory Minissale’s brilliant book on this subject: Framing Consciousness in Art: Transcultural Perspectives (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009).

40 Irrealism in the specific art of Borges and Varo is examined in detail in Chapter Six.

41 Although Husserl uses the spelling of fantasy as “phantasy,” the spelling employed in this study is, for the most part, “fantasy.”

42 John B. Brough translated into English the 2005 Springer edition of Husserl’s Phantasy, Image Consciousness, and Memory (1898-1925). Professor Brough also wrote the essay “Art and Artworld: Some Ideas for a Husserlian Aesthetic,” included in the 1988 anthology Edmund Husserl and the Phenomenological Tradition: Essays in Phenomenology, edited by Robert Sokolowski. Serbian poet, essayist, and philosophy professor Milan Uzelac wrote one of the most detailed, penetrating, and frequently referenced essays on Husserl and art, “Art and Phenomenology in Edmund Husserl,” published in 1998. These works are listed in the bibliography and are used extensively in this paper. Also it should be noted that many if not most extended discussions of aesthetics and phenomenology (regardless of which phenomenological theorist or thinker is being discussed) will at various points refer to Husserlian phenomenological principles.
That there are at least two sides and several stages to Husserl’s work is well known. Even the titles of some of the books by Husserl or books about him and his work reflect that multiplicity or what some interpret as a dichotomy. Consider these: Husserl’s *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*; Donn Welton’s *The Other Husserl: The Horizons of Transcendental Phenomenology* and *The New Husserl: A Critical Reader*; Quentin Lauer’s *The Triumph of Subjectivity: An Introduction to Transcendental Phenomenology*; Maurice Natanson’s *Edmund Husserl: Philosopher of Infinite Tasks*; Roman Ingarden’s *On the Motives Which Led Husserl to Transcendental Idealism*; Marvin Farber’s *The Foundations of Phenomenology: Edmund Husserl and the Quest for a Rigorous Science of Philosophy*; Harrison Hall’s essay “Was Husserl a Realist or an Idealist?” in *Husserl, Intentionality and Cognitive Science*; and so on. Husserlian phenomenology, generally considered to be one of the foundational forces of Continental Philosophy, has been taken up not only by Continental philosophers, but neurobiological scientists, analytic philosophers, materialists, theologians and scholars of religion. The bibliography both for Husserl’s work and the literature about him and his work is vast. And that wide wake of his work broadens to include the works of Husserl’s students such as Heidegger, Levinas, Roman Ingarden, Max Scheler, Adolf Reinach, Eugene Fink, Edith Stein, Ludwig Landgrebe, or other phenomenological scholars and artists deeply influenced by his work such as Sartre, Derrida, Merleau-Ponty, Paul Ricouer, Michel Henry, Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka, Ortega y Gasset, and many other thinkers.

Here Bourne-Taylor and Mildenberg are referencing Husserl’s words in his *Logical Investigations*, as well as referencing Merleau-Ponty in his *The Primacy of Perception*.

Moran and Cohen reference a page from Edmund Husserl, Psychological and Transcendental Phenomenology and the Confrontation with Heidegger (1927-1931). This section of the book, page 98, is one of the drafts of the infamous Encyclopaedia Britannica article on phenomenology, written jointly by Husserl and Heidegger, which, despite each thinker’s efforts, they could not agree on. A section of that page follows:

Accordingly, transcendental phenomenology is not one particular science among others; rather, when systematically elaborated, it is the realization of the idea of an absolutely universal science, specifically as eidetic science. As such it must encompass all possible a priori sciences in systematic unity, specifically by thoroughly considering the a priori connections in absolute grounding. We could even bring up the traditional expression and broaden it by saying: Transcendental phenomenology is the true and genuinely [p. 520] universal ontology that the eighteenth century already strove for but was unable to achieve. It is an ontology that is not stuck either in the naïve one-sidedness of natural positivity or, like the ontologies of Baumgarten and Wolff, in formal generalities and analytic explanations of concepts far removed from issues. Our ontology draws upon the original sources of a universal intuition that studies all essential connections, and it discloses the complete system of forms that pertains to every co-possible universum of possible being in general and, included therein, that belongs to every possible world of present <p. 32> realities.

It must be noted that David Michael Levin is a preeminent scholar of phenomenology and no novice to Husserl’s work. See Levin’s *Reason and Evidence in Husserl’s Phenomenology*. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1970.

In addition to Professor Christian Lotz’s “Depiction and Plastic Perception. A Critique of Husserl’s Theory of Picture Consciousness,” and David Michael Levin’s chapter “Husserl’s Transcendental Gaze” in his *The Philosopher’s Gaze: Modernity in the Shadows of Enlightenment*, and of course the many criticisms of Husserl’s work by both Heidegger and Derrida (which must be addressed where relevant to a Husserlian aesthetic), there are the somewhat more positive critical essays of Professor Christian Ferencz-Flatz, including “The Neutrality of Images and Husserlian Aesthetics.”

See, for example, Husserl’s writings in *Phantasy, Image Consciousness, and Memory (1898-1925)*, 38-41, 132: discussing Raphael and Dürer, 182-184: discussing Titian, 192-193: discussing a painting by Franz and Ida Brentano. Throughout this volume are many general considerations of art and aesthetics, including both visual and literary art, as well as music. See also Husserl’s discussion of Dürer’s “The Knight, Death, and the Devil” in his *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, 228-229. This last example will be explored in more detail in Chapter One of the present study.

Not meaning to be presumptuous, I wish to note that one of the goals of the present study, echoed in Wallenstein’s statement below, is in fact to tell at least some aspects of this story.

These were early students of Husserl’s work. As John J. Drummond points out (64), Husserl was very interested in this group, the so-called Munich School, who included Adolf Reinach, Moritz Geiger, Alexander Pfänder, and Max Scheler. he notes, “The Munich School was committed to a form of metaphysical realism and a Platonism regarding idea objects ….” Eventually, Husserl disagreed with some details of the group’s concepts. The Göttingen Philosophical Society, although attracted originally to Husserl’s Logical Investigations, did not agree with or follow him in his turn to “transcendental idealism,” in which objects are dependent on consciousness (205).


In a footnote (72) Malpas notes: “‘Objectivity’ is being used here in a deliberately idiosyncratic fashion that is not intended to imply any notion of factual correctness, and it ‘ontological’ rather than ‘epistemological’ in its orientation. ‘Objectivity’ refers to the way in which an object is an object—to its being (or becoming) as object—in a way that is intended to direct attention away from a concern with identity or individuation conditions and on to the question of the object in its active or process-character.”

The phrase *sub specie aeternitatis* means, roughly, in its essential or universal form or nature. It is also defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “Viewed in relation to the eternal; from a universal perspective” (“sub specie aeternitatis, adv.” *OED*)
Rubenstein is quoting Wittgenstein from *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6.44-6.45.

Rubenstein is quoting Wittgenstein from *Notebooks*, 86/86e.

Rubenstein is quoting Wittgenstein from *Culture and Value*, 5/5e.


*The Gateless Gate* is a famous collection of Chan (Zen) Buddhist koans that appeared first in China in the early 13th century and subsequently in Japan. A koan is a question, statement, story, or dialogue used in Zen Buddhist practice to provoke great doubt and test a Buddhist practitioner’s spiritual understanding, especially in the Rinzai Zen Buddhist tradition. The title to this collection has been more accurately translated in modern times by Zen teacher Robert Aitken as *The Gateless Barrier*. See Aitken’s book, *The Gateless Barrier: The Wu-Men Kuan (Mumonkan)*, San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990.

See *The Aesthetic Experience According to Abhinavagupta*, by Raniero Gnoli.

See *Schopenhauer’s Encounter with Indian Thought: Representation and Will and Their Indian Parallels*, by Stephen Cross; and *Understanding Schopenhauer Through the Prism of Indian Culture: Philosophy, Religion and Sanskrit Literature*, Arati Barua, Michael Gerhard, Matthia Koßler, eds.


See especially John Golding’s *Paths to the Absolute: Mondrian, Malevich, Kandinsky, Pollock, Newman, Rothko, and Still*.

The footnoted quote on page 252 from Kant is: “Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and reverence, the more frequently and persistently one's meditation deals with them: the starry sky above me and the moral law within me.” Emphasis is Kant’s.


The essays in *Phenomenology, Modernism and Beyond* contain some of the most significant writings available about Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology in relation to the arts. Critical questions regarding phenomenology and modernist art in this unique collection also reference the work of thinkers Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Martin Heidegger, Michel Henry and Paul Ricoeur.


Mildenberg is quoting from Husserl’s *Ideas*, 107-108.

See also Kevin M. Cahill’s *The Fate of Wonder: Wittgenstein’s Critique of Metaphysics and Modernity*, and Gordon C.F. Bearn’s *Waking to Wonder: Wittgenstein’s Existential Investigations.*


Bearn quotes Wittgenstein from (6.44) *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus*, 5.552.

Foucault is referring to a passage in Borges’ 1942 essay “The Analytical Language of John Wilkins” (*El idioma analítico de John Wilkins*). Foucault goes on to note, “This passage quotes a ‘certain Chinese encyclopedia’ in which is written that ‘animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) include in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies’.”

This blend of heavy subject matter and humor is reflected in the titles of some of Borges’ books: *A Universal History of Iniquity*, *The Garden of Forking Paths*, *The Book of Sand*, *Artifices*, and some of his stories: “The Widow Ching—Pirate,” “Man on Pink Corner,” “Et cetera,” “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*,” “The Library of Babel,” “A Dialog Between Dead Men,” “A Weary Man’s Utopia,” and so on.

This is one of a series of comments by Remedios Varo on some of her paintings as addressed to her brother, Dr. Rodrigo Varo.

At times in this study, the quotations used may not follow the best uses of English, especially in the many translations from Spanish, German, and French, the last, for example, as it is translated from Bataille’s writings. This may well not be the translators fault, but only reflecting the usage in the original language.

It is critically important to establish evidence that many modernist artists, and also some contemporary artists, and not simply Varo and Borges, attempt to express various versions of their individual sensibilities to the numinous. Chapter Four—Seeking the Numinous in Modern Art focuses on this topic.

Regarding “theological-philosophical” see Philip C. Almond’s *Rudolf Otto: An Introduction to His Philosophical Theology*. 
A number of resources used in this study utilize these terms. These include Roger Lipsey’s *An Art of Our Own: The Spiritual in Twentieth-Century Art*; Wassily Kandinsky’s *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*; David F. Martin’s *Art and the Religious Experience: The “Language” of the Sacred*; Jungo Yoon’s *Spirituality in Contemporary Art: The Idea of the Numinous*; Tuchman and Blotkamp’s *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*; Anthony J. Steinbock’s *Phenomenology and Mysticism: The Verticality of Religious Experience*; Pacquement De Loisy’s *Traces du Sacré*; Clément and Kristeva’s *The Feminine and the Sacred*; as well as Otto’s *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational.*

It should be noted that some important scholarly works have approached this topic from a variety of perspectives, including studies about Husserl, Heidegger, Levinas, Marion and others being done by Espen Dahl. See Dahl’s books in Works Cited.

Since “immanent” and “immanence” have, like transcendental, been used in both religion and philosophy, it worth noting the OED emphasis on the philosophical interpretation: 1. *Indwelling, inherent; actually present or abiding in; remaining within. In recent philosophy applied to the Deity regarded as permanently pervading and sustaining the universe, as distinguished from the notion of an external transcendent creator or ruler; immanent principle* (with Kant), *a principle limited to the realm of experience: opposed to transcendental principle.* (*“immanent, adj.”*).


One famous longtime practitioner of Transcendental Meditation is filmmaker David Lynch. See Lynch’s *Catching the Big Fish: Meditation, Consciousness, and Creativity.*

One challenge to researching and writing a study like the present one that is related to spirituality is how to compositionally bracket out presumptions and preconceptions about what spirituality is in a fresh or immediate sense beyond historical and cultural labels. An important aspect of that challenge is simply diction. Although “numinous” is the word I have selected to more precisely express—in a philosophico-phenomenological thematic context—the spiritual impulse underlying much modern and contemporary artmaking and art viewing, there are other words that support or enhance at times the usage of numinous. Though not exact synonyms, these terms can serve to clarify given instances of the more broadly applied expression “sensibility to the numinous.” Besides specific words that are more Asian in character (words like “samadhi” and “satori”), there are various western nouns and adjectives that can be associated with numinous. One such term is “epiphany” or “epiphanic”. A more generalized term would be “revelation” or “revelatory”. Ecstasy and intuition, likewise are associated with numinous, and others words and phrases will surface during the process of writing this study.

Of course the word “feeling” is also a culturally overloaded term, and a generalized amorphous concept, given its relationship to psychology and subjectively specialized meanings. Ultimately, I think it is important to retain the whole phrase of “feeling sensibility” rather than try to make feeling itself into a valid conceptual principle. If one has a “feeling sensibility,” it is a sensibility to “something,” which in this study is going to be a feeling sensibility to the numinous in relation to the functioning of
image consciousness in art. It is important to remain consistently specific in this regard.

There are numerous anthologies of these experiences. Besides the highly regarded 1902 The Varieties of Religious Experience by William James, two of the more respected longtime popular anthologies are Aldous Huxley’s 1944 The Perennial Philosophy and Richard Maurice Bucke’s 1901 Cosmic Consciousness: A Study in the evolution of the Human Mind.


Here Husserl has misspelled the name of his student, Heinrich Ochsner (1891-1970), who became a professor.

The letter is dated March 5, 1919. Two Notes: (1) from Thomas Sheehan, trns.: The original copy of this letter is found in the Rudolf-Otto-Nachlass at the Universitätsbibliothek in Marburg, West Germany, catalogues as Hs 797-794. It has been published in Hans-Walter Schütte, Religion und Christentum in der Theologie Rudolf Ottos, Berlin: de Gruyter, 1969, pp. 139-142. I have followed the more accurate transcription that is found in the Husserl Archives in Leuven, catalogued as R. I. Otto 5.III.19. I am grateful to Professor Samuel I Jsseling, Director of the Leuven Archives, for permission to translate this text. Although the letter is chiefly concerned with Oxner and with Otto’s book Das Heilige, it is one of the earliest documents in which Husserl mentions Heidegger, and specifically Heidegger’s religious orientation to Protestantism. Moreover, while this would be the first time that Otto heard the name Heidegger, it would not be the last. During 1925 Otto worked vigorously to oppose Heidegger’s promotion at Marburg to the chair vacated by Nicolai Hartmann. (Tr. note.) 2. Note via Religious Studies Stanford Education: Letters Husserl and Heidegger: March 5. 1919: Edmund Husserl to Rudolf Otto [Briefwechsel 7:205-8] Husserl writes to Professor Rudolf Otto, author of The Idea of the Holy, to offer his impressions of his student Heinrich Ochsner (1891-1970), whose name Husserl misspells here as “Oxner.” Ochsner, who had studied with Husserl and who was planning to convert from Catholicism to Protestantism, had the prospect of an assistantship with Otto at Marburg University. In the course of the letter Husserl reveals at least as much about the young Heidegger, who had become his assistant less than two months before, as he does about Ochsner, including Heidegger’s shift (if not “conversion”) to Protestantism.

It is important to emphasize that Otto’s numinous is non-rational rather than irrational.

Harten’s essay excerpt “Creating Heaven” in Simon Morely’s anthology, The Sublime, was extracted from Heaven: An Exhibition That Will Break Your Heart (Düsseldorf: Kunsthalle Düsseldorf /Ostfildern-Ruit: Hate Cantz Verlag, 1999) 9-11.

This of course does not even take into account the influence of Kant’s general thought on thinkers like Nietzsche, Heidegger, and others up to the present day.

Simon Morley describes this: “Broadly speaking, four approaches to the sublime can be identified within contemporary art and theory. These derive from Longinus, Burke, Kant and Schiller. From Longinus comes an emphasis on the transcendance of
reality through the heroic act; from Burke, the idea of the sublime as an experience of shock and awe and as a destabilizing force; from Kant the notion of the sublime as revealing a reality that is fundamentally indeterminate, undecidable and unpresentable; and from Schiller a reading of the sublime as ecstatic experience.” Morley goes on in that anthology (see Morley, *The Sublime*, which emphasizes modern and contemporary commentaries on the sublime) to divide the texts of that anthology into seven sections or categories. He names these sections *The Unpresentable, Transcendence, Nature, Technology, Terror, The Uncanny, and Altered States*. In the present study, contemporary writings that address the sublime in the sections *Transcendence* and *Altered States* are most useful, but any of the texts in *The Sublime* may reappear as resource materials for various topics or subtopics.

In the 1790s Goethe developed numerous friendships, including becoming friends and collaborator with Schiller. Goethe’s 1810 *Theory of Color* will be accessed later in this study during some considerations of color in modern art. As to Goethe and the sublime, as might be expected, his is a highly original orientation. The following is an abstract of a current dissertation titled *Goethe and the Sublime*, or *Das Erhabene bei Goethe*, by John M. Koster at the University of Toronto: *The dissertation situates the Goethean sublime in an obscured countermovement of resistance to the aestheticization the concept underwent in the 18th century. Before the encounter with the English aesthetic concept of the sublime, the German notion of das Erhabene (the sublime) named not a category of aesthetic experience, but a social affect. In contrast to the Sublime of Edmund Burke’s theory, which explicitly excludes melancholy from the sources of the Sublime, das Erhabene is an affect related to the self-overcoming of melancholic subjectivity. As the aestheticized notion of the sublime displaced das Erhabene, Goethe became one of the most radical innovators of the aesthetics of the sublime. But as is demonstrated in chapters on *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, *Elective Affinities*, *Faust* and *Wilhelm Meister*, he did so with the aim of recovering the displaced meaning of das Erhabene as social affect. Goethe’s sublime aims to show at every turn that the so-called "aesthetic experience" of the sublime is really displaced social affect. His treatment of the sublime therefore constitutes a radical critique of the establishment of aesthetics as an independent sphere of inquiry. There is for Goethe no way to understand aesthetic experience independently of its social context. By reconnecting the sublime to the original social meaning of das Erhabene, Goethe recovers the aesthetics of the sublime as a means of mediating and facilitating the movement of subjectivity from frustrated stasis to divine creativity; i.e., from exclusion to participation in the material creation of reality.*

>http://hdl.handle.net/1807/35868<

In *The Sublime*, author Philip Shaw references Kristeva once, in a section subtitled “Towards the Fragile Absolute” (144-146), which discusses “the Lacanian thesis of woman as the foreclosed or sublime object of patriarchal discourse” (144). Shaw does frequently reference Slavoj Zizek, and at times uses the films of David Lynch to accentuate points to emphasize a more contemporary and at times postmodernist version of the sublime.

Morely, in his editor’s introduction to *The Sublime*, names two of Lyotard’s essays, the 1984 “The Sublime and the Avant-garde” and the 1982 “Presenting the Unpresentable: The Sublime” (first appearing in *Art Forum*).


It is worth quoting Otto’s assessment of Goethe’s “pagan” orientation to the numinous to give a more detailed sense of the difference between the two: There can be no clearer expression than this of the prodigiously strong impression which divination of the numinous may make upon the mind, and that obviously not on a single occasion but repeatedly, till it has become almost a matter of habit. But at the same time this 'divination' of Goethe is not one that apprehends the numinous as the prophet does. It does not rise to the elevation of the experience of Job, where the non-rational mystery is at the same time experienced and extolled as supra-rational, as of profoundest value, and as holiness in its own right. It is rather the fruit of a mind which, for all its depth, was not equal to such profundities as these, and to which, therefore, the non-rational counterpoint to the melody of life could only sound in confused consonance, not in its authentic harmony, indefinable but palpable. Therefore, though it is genuine divination, it is the divination of Goethe 'the pagan', as he sometimes used to call himself. Indeed, it is a divination that functions only at the level of the 'daemonic' which, as we saw, precedes religion proper, not at the level of the divine and the holy in the truest sense; and it shows very clearly how that sort of merely 'daemonic' experience of the numinous may in a highly cultivated mind only stir emotional reactions of bewilderment and bedazzlement, without giving real light or warmth to the soul (Otto 153).


According to Roderick Main (158), Jung began to reference the concept of the numinous in his writings in the 1930’s, especially using it as “one of the defining characteristics of archetypes,” but also as the “core of religious experience.”

Murray Stein attributes part of the Otto’s preference for feeling over thinking to Otto’s experiences of what he came to term “the numinous” in India and what is now Morocco during his extensive travels (41). However, it should be noted here that despite his travels and liberal observations of other religious cultures, and his suffering the abusive criticism and ridicule of his theological colleagues because of his liberal attitude towards other religions, Otto continued to consider Christianity to be a religion superior to all others (43), and this attitude of Christian exclusivity and superiority is undeniably reflected in his Das Heilige.

See, for example, Stein’s references to Jung’s writings as evidence of Jung’s own “receptivity to numinous experience” (45), including the descriptions in Jung’s 1963 Memories, Dreams, Reflections.


Goethe wrote “The Trilogy of Passion” at the age of 75. It was appended to an edition of The Sorrows of Young Werther published at that time. See The Poems of Goethe, 200.

The chapter that explicates Schopenhauer’s aesthetic is, like the present explication of the numinous and Husserlian methodology, central to this study. Much of Schopenhauer’s thought, and especially his argument about the pivotal transcendent importance of the artistic experience, is thematically essential to elucidating the thesis here. One of the challenges in explicating and including the Schopenhauerian aesthetic, besides weaving that aesthetic with a Husserlian transcendental phenomenological methodology, is showing how Schopenhauer’s passionate expression of the sublime in art is simultaneously a sensibility to the numinous, the root of which is being excavated in the present chapter.


In his Transcendent Experiences: Phenomenology and Critique, Roy considers how the writings of Kant, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Hegel, William James, Rudolf Otto, and other philosophers or philosopher-theologians are significant in his study of the transcendent experience. Some aspects of Roy’s explication of his thesis are relevant to this study, others are not.

See Louis Roy’s discussion of Husserl as well as how Husserl’s concept of intentionality and “inner perception” both echoes and differs from the concepts of his mentor Franz Brentano in Roy’s Mystical Consciousness: Western Perspectives and Dialogue with Japanese thinkers. 7-10, 40.

Roy quotes Husserl’s words in Mystical Consciousness, 8.

Roy notes that Otto’s discussion of Gefühl occurs in Otto’s 1909 book The Philosophy of Religion Based on Kant and Fries, in the “Author’s Notes on the Translation” written at the time of the English translation.

Roy references a section (146-147) of Otto’s Das Heilige in which Otto is considering Schleiermacher’s writings: What Schleiermacher is feeling after is really the faculty or capacity of deeply absorbed contemplation, when confronted by the vast, living totality and reality of things as it is in nature and history. Wherever a mind is exposed in a spirit of absorbed submission to impressions of ‘the universe’, it becomes capable—so he lays it down—of experiencing ‘intuitions’ and ‘feelings’ (Anschauungen and Gefühle) of something that is, as it were, a sheer overplus, in addition to empirical reality. This overplus, while it cannot be apprehended by mere theoretic cognition of the world and the cosmic system in the form it assumes for science, can nevertheless be really and truly grasped and experienced in intuition, and is given form in single ‘intuitions’. And these, in turn, assume shape in definite statements and propositions, capable of a certain groping formulation, which are not without analogy with theoretic propositions, but are to be clearly distinguished from them by their free and merely felt, not reasoned, character. In themselves they are
groping intimations of meanings figuratively apprehended. They cannot be employed as 'statements of doctrine' in the strict sense, and can neither be built into a system nor used as premises [sic] for theoretical conclusions. But, though these intuitions are limited and inadequate, they are none the less indisputably true, i.e. true as far as they go; and for all Schleiermacher's aversion to the word in this connexion they must certainly be termed cognitions, modes of knowing, though, of course, not the product of reflection, but the intuitive outcome of feeling. Their import is the glimpse of an Eternal, in and beyond the temporal and penetrating it, the apprehension of a ground and meaning of things in and beyond the empirical and transcending it. They are surmises or inklings of a Reality fraught with mystery and momentousness.

115 Virtually all the organized religions include sacred art. Tibetan Buddhism and Christian Byzantine art are two (of many) salient examples. While such art can be beautiful, it is also sometimes clearly intended to be a means of worship or devotion for the particular religion associated with it. On the other hand, the contemplation of any art, including modern art, is not necessarily an expression of religious motivations. Such contemplation may in fact even be rooted in a more general spiritual impulse, one not associated with a specific religion.


117 See also Lawrence Weschler. Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees: Over Thirty Years of Conversations with Robert Irwin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

118 Obviously, it was not only Hilma af Klint and Emma Kunz’s interest in the occult and spiritually accented themes that marginalized them; the fact that they were women working in a gender-biased society was equally significant. One could easily argue that these are two biases have continued to this moment, although gender prejudice has been addressed far more frequently in recent years.

119 As noted in the previous chapter, much evidence points to the early abstractionists interest in spirituality and art. Besides many books on this topic, see also exhibition catalogs that focus on the works of these artists. See especially the essays, commentaries, and art images in exhibition catalogs: The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985, Traces du Sacre (Traces of the Sacred), The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860–1989, and Inventing Abstraction 1910-1925: How a Radical Idea Changed Modern Art.

120 It should be noted here that intentionality is not meant to be comprehended as or restricted a completely separate means to navigate the labyrinth of the transcendent experience in art, at least not in this study. The quote from Husserl about three concepts of consciousness, for example, is given in a chapter of his Logical Investigations, and the title of that chapter illustrates the point being made in this endnote. The title of Husserl’s chapter is “Consciousness as the phenomenological Subsistence of the Ego and Consciousness as Inner Perception” (LI, v. 2, 81).

121 This transcultural aspect of Percy’s work expresses not so much a self-conscious “borrowing” of Asian aesthetic as a demonstration of “Asia as Method,” a reference made by scholar and curator Alexandra Munroe to a 1960 lecture of that title by the Japanese scholar of Chinese literature Takeuchji Yoshimi. Munroe, the Samsung
Senior Curator of Asian Art at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, and the curator of the 2009 exhibition at that museum, *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860-1989*, referenced Yoshimi’s lecture in her brilliant introductory essay of the catalog for *The Third Mind*. It should be emphasized that this exhibition and the excellent large catalog that accompanied it, provide some of the most extensive and detailed materials and resources ever created to address the influence of Asian aesthetics on American art.

122 For a full consideration of Percy’s aesthetic and his abstract art, see my essay: Carroll, “Transcultural Intuition and Beauty in the Paintings of Robert Percy.”

123 Cage’s interest in Zen Buddhism, on the other hand, has been acknowledged in art scholarship.

124 Originally in Graham’s *Marcel Duchamp: Conversations with the Grand Master*, 1968, 3.

125 Interesting here is that the word “stoppages” is associated with invisibility.


127 The orientation here is neither a denial nor validation of Joselit’s study.

128 “For the rest of his life he spoke and wrote English almost like a native—could indeed sometimes pass as one for his first few minutes with an English stranger. The English prose he was to write in adult life, though containing minor blemishes of grammar and syntax, had the same highly distinctive character of his German, though this is perhaps less surprising when one remembers that his adult German prose had an English model. Despising as he did the pretentiousness so characteristic of German writing—and the long, convoluted sentences that went with it—and seeing nothing in the language itself that called for these things, he consciously set out to write German in the way Hume wrote English” (Magee 5).

129 Almost every book about Schopenhauer’s philosophy, both his metaphysical philosophy and his aesthetic philosophy, comments at some point about how emphatically Schopenhauer’s writings influenced various artists, writers, poets, musicians, and other individuals in the arts. These books include, among others, Sophia Vasalou’s *Schopenhauer and the Aesthetic Standpoint: Philosophy as a Practice of the Sublime*; Julian Young’s *Schopenhauer*; W. Wallace’s *Life of Arthur Schopenhauer*; Rüdiger Safranski’s *Schopenhauer and the Wild Years of Philosophy*; Stephen Cross’s *Schopenhauer’s Encounter with Indian Thought: Representation and Will and Their Indian Parallels*; David E. Cartwright’s *Historical Dictionary of Schopenhauer’s Philosophy: Willing and Nothingness: Schopenhauer as Nietzsche’s Educator*, Christopher Janaway, editor; *Schopenhauer, Philosophy and the Arts*, Dale Jacquette, editor; *Better Consciousness: Schopenhauer’s Philosophy of Value*, Alex Neill and Christopher Janaway, editors.

130 As Cartwright points out (125), Schopenhauer did write that “my doctrine is pessimism” in 1828 while comparing his philosophy with pantheism, the latter of which he described as being optimistic. Cartwright cites this remark as being found in *Manuscript Remains*, vol. III. “Adversaria,” para.66.

131 Discussing objects and the experience of objects in the world immediately invites a comparison with Husserl’s phenomenology and the concepts about objects and perception, and intentionality and givenness, for example.
The second volume, WWP II, consisting of “supplements” or essays expanding the Books of the first volume, was published in 1844.

The complexity of Schopenhauer’s thought is a challenge to effectively summarize. In fact, to label Schopenhauer as simply being a “pessimist,” as he so often has been categorized, is an obvious example. Besides the challenges of summarizing his work, such labels undermine the significance of his original and also optimistic thought and aesthetic.

As Aquila notes (xii, footnote iv): “‘Representation’ and its cognates are fairly standard in translations of Kant, e.g., in the translations of the Critique of Pure Reason most frequently cited in the literature: Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1929); Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998). On the other hand, Werner Pluhar opts for ‘presentation’ (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1996). References to the Kritik der Vernunft appear in standard A/B format, referring to the pagination of the first (1781) and second (1787) editions, typically so indicated in the margins of modern editions.”


Another scholarly advantage to Aquila’s translation of The World as Will and Presentation is that far more footnotes are included than with other translations. For example, at this junction while discussing Schopenhauer’s use of presentation in a theatrical and spectator context, Aquila includes a useful footnote that also notes Schopenhauer’s use of Puppenspiel (puppet show) and a “tragi-comedy” of which one is the spectator. Aquila then states, “Just as with the corresponding English term, Vorstellung can refer either to what is presented or to the process or action in presenting it” (xiii).

It worth noting as an aside, however, the somewhat paradoxical and humorous nature of Schopenhauer’s advice to put aside emotion and passion, given that Arthur Schopenhauer was one of the most emotionally fueled, passionate, and strongly opinionated voices in the history of philosophy!

Schopenhauer also later considered On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Ground: A Philosophical to serve as an introduction to WWP I (Cartwright 53).

As he did with so many of Schopenhauer’s ideas, Nietzsche took and used for his own purposes the term principium inviduationis directly from Schopenhauer. See Tom Rockmore’s Art and Truth after Plato, 246.


This is not the first time scholars have assigned a mystical connection to Schopenhauer’s work. An earlier quote by Dale Jacquette on page 2 began with this sentence (emphasis on “mystical” is mine): “With its roots firmly embedded in a particular interpretation of Plato, Kant, and Asian philosophy, Schopenhauer’s theory sheds light on these important intellectual and mystical religious traditions.”
The same might be said of Nietzsche, who is often described as Schopenhauer’s student. See Magee’s *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer*, Safranski’s *Schopenhauer and the Wild Years of Philosophy*, and especially Janaway’s *Willing and Nothingness: Schopenhauer as Nietzsche’s Educator*.

See Magee’s *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer*, especially “A Note on Schopenhauer and Buddhism,” 340-345.

Here Charles Muses notes that such critiques are typified especially by “a quantity of popularizing writings.” A larger question that might be addressed beyond Muses comments and beyond the scope of the present study is why western philosophy has been willing to remain self-enclosed by a Eurocentric sheath of presumed exclusivity. While the term “global art” indicates that contemporary philosophical and aesthetic orientations are challenging that exclusivity, this is a relatively recent shift. In that sense, Schopenhauer was a pioneer in that his thought refused such exclusivities, and Nietzsche, somewhat less than Schopenhauer, acknowledged the importance of Eastern thought as well. Heidegger, on the other hand, while incorporating some Asian concepts into his philosophy, generally failed to acknowledge those sources. (See, among other resources, Heidegger’s *On the Way to Language*, Harper, 1982; Reinhard May’s *Heidegger’s Hidden Sources: East-Asian Influences on his Work*, Routledge, 1996; Peter Wilberg’s *Heidegger, Phenomenology and Indian Thought*, New Gnosis Publications, 2008; Wei Zhang’s *Heidegger, Rorty, And the Eastern Thinkers: A Hermeneutics of Cross-cultural Understanding*, State University of New York Press, 2006; J.J. Clarke’s *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter Between Asian and Western Thought*, Routledge, 1997; and Graham Parkes’ *Nietzsche and Asian Thought*, University of Chicago Press, 1996.

Wittgenstein, Derrida, Roland Barthes, many other thinkers come to mind. In the context of Varo and Borges’s irrealistic fabulist art-making, language remains as one primary and very significant element, one that I intend to address primarily through Bakhtinian aesthetics, as discussed at the conclusion of this chapter and in even more detail in the final chapter on the artist-philosopher.

The “passage already quoted” by Schopenhauer signals the same quote he used following his earlier reference (WWI 224) to Byron’s words: “Are not the mountains, waves and skies, a part / Of me and of my soul, as I of them?” (*Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, III, 72, Canto III).

Much of Kandinsky’s writing brings up the subject of music. See especially his 1926 *Point and Line to Plane (Punkt und Linie zu Fläche)*, which was the ninth in a series of fourteen Bauhaus books edited by Walter Gropius and L. Moholy-Nagy, and many other Kandinsky writings. See also Kandinsky’s exchanges with his friend the composer Arnold Schoenberg (who was also influenced by Schopenhauer’s work), especially in *Schoenberg, Kandinsky, and the Blue Rider*. Also see *The Sounding Cosmos: A Study in the Spiritualism of Kandinsky and the Genesis of Abstract Painting*, by Sixten Ringbom.

Another orientation of *Gefühl* would be that conceptual thought and a sensibility to the numinous can occur simultaneously, a point that will be returned to later in the study.

Deborah J. Haynes is a pioneer in applying Bakhtin’s theories to visual art. See her books *Bakhtin and the Visual Arts* and her *Bakhtin Reframed*. 
In noting that many of the terms in Bakhtin’s early essays are related to theology, Haynes is referencing Graham Pechey’s *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Word in the World* (153).

According to Husserl, “The life of humans is nothing but a way to God. I try to reach this goal without theological proofs, methods, supports; namely, to arrive at God without God. I, as it were, must eliminate God from my scientific existence in order to pave the way to God for humans who do not have, as you do, the certainty of faith through the Church. I know my procedure could be dangerous for me were I not a human deeply bound to God and a faithful Christian” (See Laycock, 1-2, and 22).

See especially the work of phenomenological scholar Angela Ales Bello: *The Divine in Husserl and Other Explorations, and “Archeology of Religious Knowledge*” in *Phenomenology and the Numinous*. See [http://philosopherartists.blogspot.com](http://philosopherartists.blogspot.com) for some of the strongest writing about the artist-philosopher. There are some strong connections at that blog with professors and graduate students the European Graduate School in in Saas-Fee, Wallis, Switzerland.

Although some of this material was covered in Chapter Four about the numinous and modern art, what comes to mind immediately are all the artists who wrote influential books, some only about aesthetic details, but many about the philosophy of art and general philosophy as well. Some, such as Kandinsky, Mondrian, Malevich, Rothko, and others were and are excellent writers.

Although it can be confusing, when referring directly to Husserl’s words or concepts, the spelling “phantasy” is used, Husserl’s spelling, but when considering the general topic of fantasy it seems more appropriate to use the contemporary spelling “fantasy.”

See *Hilma af Klint: Pioneer of Abstraction*, edited by Iris Müller-Westermann, with Jo Widoff; and *3X Abstraction: New Methods of Drawing: Hilma af Klint, Emma Kunz, Agnes Martin*, edited by Catherine de Zegher and Hendel Teicher.

Husserl put a footnote at the end of this excerpt: “We intend to try to pursue as far as possible the point of view of imagination and the notion that phantasy presentation can be interpreted as image presentation—although there is no dearth of objections to this attempt, objections that subsequently turn out to be justified.”

In some respects irrealism and fabulism or interchangeable. In this study whatever is the dominant topical issue in a given sentence is made the noun, be it “irreal fabulism” or “fabulist irrealism.”

Since these are discussed as “objects” rather than stories, they are not enclosed in quotes like most story titles, but are given formal capitalization because they are places or people. The Library of Babel is not just a story, but a place within the story that is given its reality by the author.

In her book *Magic(al) Realism*, Maggie Ann Bowers delineates three terms: “magic realism,” “magical realism” and “marvelous realism,” but uses the term “magic(al) realism” where all three have common features.

This is a reference to British surrealist painter Lenora Carrington, a close friend of Remedios Varo who also lived and worked in Mexico for years.

See Gracia, Jorge J.E, Carolyn Korsmeyer and Rodolphe Gasché, eds. *Literary Philosophers: Borges, Calvino, Eco*. Also see Williams, Merel, *Henry James and the

163 These different meanings are defined at "fantasy | phantasy, n." OED Online. Oxford University Press, June 2014. Web. 8 September 2014.

164 Although Husserl uses the spelling of fantasy as “phantasy,” the spelling employed in this study is, for the most part, “fantasy.”

165 Although this article is referenced in the bibliography as “Art for Life’s Sake,” Art Therapy: Journal of the American Art Therapy Association, 9 (4), 169-175, 1992, the journal editor notes: “Art Therapy would like to thank the author and the National Art Education Association for permission to reprint this article. The article originally appeared in What is Art For? Keynote Addresses of the 1991 NAEA Convention, Karen Lee Carroll, ed., 15-26.”

166 Besides referencing the books by Agee and the Goldsteins in this passage, Dissanayate is referencing a 1997 paper presented at the College Art Association by Carma R. Gorman titled “Period Eye.”

167 A recent important resource for prehistoric art is Werner Herzog’s remarkable documentary film, Cave of Forgotten Dreams, which takes the viewer along on a exclusive expedition into the Chauvet Cave in France, home to the most ancient pictorial art discovered—dating back over 30,000 years. The sense that art-making is an innate human capacity and need is directly communicated in that film.

168 Also very relevant to a study of Varo and Borges is, as will be seen ahead in this chapter, Bakhtin’s carnival or the carnivalesque.


170 In his essay, “Bataille, the Emotive Intellectual,” Besnier attempts to address three charges widely leveled at Bataille—that he was hostile to democracy and was seduced by Fascism, that he became a Stalinist, and that he was a spiritual seeker. Besnier notes that while there are some factual elements in these accusations by the intelligentsia of his day, none of the charges reflected a definitive or complete orientation to Bataille’s work, even though his writings were to some degree marginalized because of the reactions to these charges. Part of the reaction may have been the unconventional approach to eroticism in some of Bataille’s writings, especially in his controversial 1928 novel, Histoire de l’oeil, (Story of the Eye) (under pseudonym of Lord Auch). In the current study, the fundamental elucidation of Bataille’s work focuses on his spiritual search and writings about mysticism, which was at least as taboo as his erotic writings. Even though his work was valued posthumously by Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, Baudrillard, Kristeva, and others, his interest in the numinous and fascination with mysticism was criticized and scorned by intellectual contemporaries such as Sartre.

171 Besnier references Bataille’s “Letter to Roger Caillois, 20 July 1939” for this quote.

172 See especially Goodman’s Languages of Art.

173 Among the many studies of Borges and his work, see especially Literary Philosophers: Borges, Calvino, Eco, edited by Jorge J.E. Gracia, Carolyn Korsmeyer, and Rodolphe Gasché; Signs of Borges, by Sylvia Molloy; Out of Context: Historical
Reference and the Representation of Reality in Borges, by Daniel Balderston; The Narrow Act: Borges’s Art of Allusion, by Ronald Christ; Borges and Memory: Encounters with the Human Brain, by Rodrigo Quiñ Quiroga; and Borges and His Fiction: A Guide to His Mind and Art, by Gene H. Bell-Villada.

Johnson’s comment.

David E. Johnson found (and translated) this quote in María Esther Vázquez’s Borges: Imágenes, memorias, diálogos, Caracas: Monte Ávila Editores, 1977, 105. Johnson also references in a footnote a quote from Ivan Almeida’s essay, “De Borges a Schopenhauer” in Variaciones Borges 17: 103-41: “appreciation of a philosophical doctrine is, for Borges, a function of the virtualities of fiction that this doctrine offers him” (113).


“A Problem” was included in Borges’s 1960 collection, The Maker.


Actually Derrida does write more about Borges in another context, which is discussed farther ahead.

The Garden of Forking Paths (El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan) was actually published as one of the volumes of the two-volume collection titled Ficciones (1935-1944), with Artifices (Artificious) as the second volume.

This is not at all intended to mean that all critical theorists and philosophers are hopelessly arrogant and egocentric characters. Quite the contrary, many thinkers are modest men and women. One thinks of Husserl, Wittgenstein and Bakhtin, three relatively humble philosophical giants, and of numerous other figures. And even for those philosophers or theorists who have moments of seeming quite “full of themselves,” those may be an instance when the writer is unconscious about how he or she is communicating in a passionate moment of arguing for an idea. Nonetheless, this issue does need to be openly acknowledged.

Originally from La rosa profunda (The Unending Rose), 1975.

See especially Peter Lang’s Borges, Swedenborg and Mysticism, as well that book’s extensively documentation and bibliography on this subject.

See also Fig. 1: Exploration of the Sources of the Orinoco River (Exploración de las Fuentes del rio Orinoco), 1959.

Her original words are: Este cuadro es a mi juicio uno de los mejores que he pintado. Es un modelo de traje de vagabundo, pero se trata de un vagabundo no liberado, es un traje muy práctico y cómodo, como locomoción tiene tracción delantera, si levanta el bastón, se detiene; el traje se puede cerrar herméticamente por la noche, tiene una puertecilla que se puede cerrar con llave, algunas partes del traje son de madera, pero como digo, el hombre no está liberado: en un lado del traje hay un recoveco que equivale a la sala, allí hay un retrato colgado, tres libros. En el pecho lleva una maceta donde cultiva una rosa, planta más fina y delicada que las que encuentra por esos bosques, pero necesita el retrato, la rosa (añoranza de un jardincito de una casa) y su gato; no es verdaderamente libre (Ovalle 115).

Swinford is quoting from Octavio Paz’s Visiones y desapariciones de Remedios Varo.

This quote from Varo’s letter to a Senor Gardner can also be found elsewhere, one being in the catalog for the 2012 exhibition *Indelible Fables: Remedios Varo*, in the catalog’s essay, “Remedios Varo: In Search of the Invisible Thread” by Terri Geis.

In this sentence, intuition is meant in the more common usage of sensing something rather than the usage of phenomenological intuition introduced earlier in the study.