

thinking

togetherness

ANDREJ BOŽIČ (*Ed.*)

**THINKING TOGETHERNESS**

**PHENOMENOLOGY AND SOCIALITY**

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The scientific monograph is published as part of the effectuation of the research program *The Humanities and the Sense of Humanity from Historical and Contemporary Viewpoints* (P6-0341), the research project *The Hermeneutic Problem of the Understanding of Human Existence and Coexistence in the Epoch of Nihilism* (J7-4631), and the infrastructure program *Center for the Promotion of the Humanities* (I0-0036).

The publication of the book is financially supported by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency (ARIS).

CIP - Kataložni zapis o publikaciji  
Narodna in univerzitetna knjižnica, Ljubljana

165.62:316(082)

THINKING togetherness : phenomenology and sociality / Andrej Božič (ed.). -  
Ljubljana : Institute Nova Revija for the Humanities, 2023. - (Humanistična zbirka  
INR = The Humanities Series INR)

ISBN 978-961-7014-40-2  
COBISS.SI-ID 172262659

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PHENOMENOLOGY AND SOCIALITY

**INR** | INSTITUTE NOVA REVUJA  
FOR THE HUMANITIES

Ljubljana 2023

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Marco Russo

# THE THEATER OF APPEARANCES

## SOCIAL PHENOMENOLOGY OF EXCENTRICITY

*Abstract:* Helmuth Plessner, one of the fathers of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century philosophical anthropology (with Max Scheler and Arnold Gehlen), proposed an anthropological model based on the notion of excentricity, and developed an aesthesiology, i.e., a philosophy of embodied symbolic forms. I outline the social phenomenology of the excentric model from such an aesthesiological perspective. First, I highlight the structural relationship between excentricity, sociality, and theater, then I focus on the specifically aesthesiological aspects of this relationship, which also have ethical implications.

*Keywords:* excentricity, aesthesiology, symbolic forms, theater, dialectics.

### I. Phenomenology, hermeneutics, morphology

Plessner attended Husserl's lectures in Göttingen for a while and also planned to write a doctoral thesis under his supervision (Plessner 1959a, 348–349; Vydrová 2020). The project did not materialize, but the phenomenological imprint remained. For Plessner, phenomenology is an instrument for reading the manifold manifestations of experience, without relegating them to a theoretical box and without immediately reducing them to data for scientific explanations. No science grasps “das Phänomenhafte am Phänomen” (Plessner 1928, 30). With phenomenology, philosophy—instead of being the writing of books about books—finally becomes a reading of reality: “Arbeit unter offenem Horizont”; “im Freien philosophieren” (Plessner 1959b, 359).

Following the tradition, which Plessner traces back to Goethe and Herder (Plessner 1923, 32–33; Plessner 1928, 24 and 32), the phenomenal appearance does not conceal, but reveals the nature of something. Between essence and appearance, the nature and the form of something, there is an intimate relationship; in the case of living beings, this relationship is dialectical (Plessner 1928, 115; Holz 2003, 117–139) in the sense that essence (what one is) develops through contrast with appearance (how one is), i.e., through a series of positionings, adaptations, and balancing acts between the individual and its body. The phenomenological description of forms also requires a hermeneutic support, in order to outline the meaning of what we describe; meaning has to do with temporally conditioned values, directions, and reasons (Plessner 1970, 371; Lessing 1998). Thus, phenomenology grasps “das Vokabular der Erscheinungsweise und Modi des Empfindens” (Plessner 1970, 373); hermeneutics deciphers that dictionary by placing it in the cultural-historical context. Both are based on the dialectics between essence and appearance, individual and form, which characterizes life.

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## **II. Dialectics of limits**

The most important element of the Plessnerian phenomenological morphology is the limit. Things have spatial limits. The limit is the criterion of identification that allows us to distinguish one thing from another. Boundaries are arbitrarily modifiable as long as they are inert. In living things, on the other hand, the limit is a proper irreducible part, not a mere contour; it assumes the function of a border that introduces the directional opposition between an inside and an outside (Plessner 1928, 103–104). A living body does not end upon its own boundary, but establishes a relationship with it, as if there were someone “behind” it who assumes a position with respect to its body. The relationship of a living body to its boundaries is, therefore, called “positionality” (ibid., 130–132). Positionality takes on an increasingly pronounced character as one moves from the open plant form to the closed animal form, where centralization is also physically localized in a brain. The processual characteristics of biology (nourishment, transformation, development, mobility, struggle, death) are positionally featured, they derive from and express the original inside–outside bipolarity.

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The human excentric form is an extreme complication of the centralized closed form. The psychophysical center, upon which the animal lives, is again placed in front of the individual: as body image, as external self-representation, as the reflexive power to become an object and to look at itself from outside. One's physical center is both the pole of convergence and of external projection of one's identity. I am my body, which, however, is also experienced as the "sheath" that covers me (Plessner 1967, 319). The same duplicity appears between my body and the social body, into which my body places me. I am the center of my body, but I am also the periphery of countless other external centers. Thus, the formula for excentricity is: "Ich bin, aber ich habe mich nicht" (Plessner 1961, 190).

Man finds himself halfway between the egocentric environment of the animal (inner and outer world) and the allocentric world (*Mitwelt*, the common world). The positional distance of the self from the self forms an inner field, which is generated in opposition to an outer field. These two fields still have a circumscribed and environmental character, whereas the common field is open and indeterminate, neither internal nor external. The *Mitwelt* is a third sphere, the sphere of the spirit, which, however, is not the dialectical synthesis of inner and outer worlds, but rather their overlapping point: the common place, where everyone perceives themselves from the outside, from the position of others: "Mitwelt ist die vom Menschen als Sphäre anderer Menschen erfaßte Form der eigenen Position" (Plessner 1928, 302). Here, each person addresses themselves and others by saying: you, he/she, we (*ibid.*, 300).

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In the *Mitwelt*, I am a face, a name, a body that works, loves, and suffers ... But everyone is a face, a name, a body that works, loves, and suffers. Thus, the origin of sociality lies neither in the I nor in the We, because both are traversed by distance, by an impersonal factor. The excentric "I" has a permanent distance from itself; the "We" is the collective reflection of this distance: a group of people who have their extraneousness as beings "outside the center" in common. The social bond derives from this mutual exposure, from the need to be recognized, although just at the moment, when others recognize me, I realize that I am not exactly what they see. The bond between inner, outer, and common worlds has a "dialectical structure" (*ibid.*, 299) with no final synthesis; the only synthesis is "das leere Hindurch der Vermittlung"

(ibid., 292), i.e., the *oscillation* between one pole and the other. Unity is thus a momentary balance, a provisional artifice; and it is this that distinguishes the Plessnerian social dialectics from the Hegelian-Marxist dialectics. Sociality as unity of the manifold is an infinite task, it has only a regulative value.

From this framework, a liberal conception emerges, where, however, institutions and rules are not external limits to individual freedom, but instruments for its realization. The impersonality of the common sphere, the abstraction of public rules, must in turn materialize in forms of everyday life. Since they are a part of personal identity, each person is invited to execute the public rules by overseeing their effectiveness, applying them with creative wisdom. As in the theater, a role is fixed and already defined, but each actor gives it his or her specific imprint, to the point of completely renewing that role. This comparison is not accidental. For Plessner, the image of society as theater is not a mere metaphor, but the exact description of social life, which takes place within the *in-between*: in the oscillation between individual difference and public indifference. As in the theater, a successful society is one, where

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### III. Social theater

Theatricality is the proper form of being excentric. Plessner gave anthropological value to the theatrical dimension (Plessner 1948; 1960a and b; 1961, 195–205). We could say that, on the biological side, theatricality coincides with morphology, with the revelatory and communicative character of the body, which in turn depends on the dialectics between essence and form, body and limit. On the cultural side, theatricality signals the complication of this dialectics; it becomes an ambiguous interweaving of revelation and concealment, identity and otherness. Ambiguity is not an obstacle to be overcome, but is structural, because it derives from excentricity. Theater here properly becomes a drama, a story, linking present, past, and future, a story of men, representing themselves, in order to grasp the sense and non-sense of what they do. “Nichts ist der Mensch von sich aus [...]. Er ist nur, wozu er sich macht und versteht. Als seine Möglichkeit gibt er sich erst sein Wesen kraft der Verdoppelung in einer Rollenfigur, mit der er sich zu identifizieren versucht.” (Plessner 1961, 204.)

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On stage, man is a mask, an actor; behind the mask, is not the authentic, but an undefined self. On the other hand, the mask is a fiction, an anonymous and interchangeable role. The natural morphology gets complicated, because forms take on a symbolic value and enter the realm of fiction. Form is no longer merely a revelation, but a representation, sometimes conscious, sometimes unconscious; thus, it becomes a sophisticated language that overlaps facts and interpretations, reality and appearance.

The theatrical concept of *Verkörperung* (embodiment, incarnation, personification) sums up this overlapping. The actor embodies a character; they are and are not what they appear to be. Their body embodies a fiction, which is not simply a lie, but an artifice, a symbolic medium, which materializes the incorporeal: thought, imagination, spirit, culture (Plessner 1948). Thus, from a theatrical term, *Verkörperung* becomes the key term for the analysis of the relationship between truth and fiction, the immaterial and the material. *Verkörperung* describes how the individual enters the scene of the world, and how this scene is configured through individuals and their actions. The scene is configured through the system of signs and symbols that men construct over time; men configure themselves, in turn, through the system of signs and symbols that belong to their epoch.

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There are therefore two levels of *Verkörperung*. The first concerns the study of the mind–body, spirit–matter relationship; the second concerns the social play. They are both the field of enquiry of aesthesiology, which is a philosophy of culture (Plessner 1923, 279; 1970, 370–384) or, as I prefer to say, a philosophy of embodied symbolic forms, because these forms have a corporeal frame. Indeed, aesthesiology studies “das innere Konditionssystem, welches zwischen den symbolischen Formen und der physischen Organisation herrscht” (Plessner 1928, 33). Aesthesiology examines culture on the basis of the relationship between symbolic meanings, types of action, and perception. The body, and its sensory differentiation linked to various cognitive and productive performances, is the guide for this research. Thus, the dimension of fiction or of cultural artifice turns out to have an objective grounding; the spirit is free, creative, but not arbitrary. Culture has a body, and works within the limits and functional distinctions that a body has.

Aufgabe einer Ästhesiologie des Leibes ist es, die spezifischen Konkretisierungsmodi der Verleiblichung unseres eigenen Körpers zu erkennen [...]. Sie muß am Leitfaden geformten Verhaltens vorgehen, die unverwechselbare Rolle einer Sinnesmodalität für seine Verkörperung dabei im Auge haben und so versuchen, dem Aufbaugesetz der Erscheinungsweisen unserer Umwelt von den Verkörperungsweisen aus auf die Spur zu kommen. (Plessner 1970, 383–384.)

#### IV. The social body

260 Identity develops through figurations that represent ourselves to ourselves and others (Plessner 1961, 195 ff.; Stahlhut 2005). The first figuration is one's own body. I *am* my body, but at the same time I *have* a body like an external thing that I must learn to inhabit. In fact, it takes a long learning process, before one learns to walk and govern one's movements. The balance remains precarious in any case, as we see in situations of clumsiness, in uncontrolled expressions of laughing and crying, in illness. In these cases, the duplicity of the body is clearly revealed; the body is the personal, sentimental, and communicative medium, and is at the same time an external thing that hinders oneself and one's bonds with others (Wehrle 2013).

From the individual *Verkörperung* of the self with respect to one's own body, one moves onward to social *Verkörperung*; having a body now means becoming a public figure. I dress, talk, express myself, think, and act according to certain patterns. I am a person-mask that assumes a number of roles; I am both the center and the periphery of a *Mitwelt*, a scene that extends further and further from my environment. This scene is an anonymous social body that is constantly intertwined with my individual body. This moment of decentralization is necessary; a certain amount of alienation is necessary to be oneself. Social alienation stabilizes my identity and allows me to get in touch with myself. "Daß ein jeder ist, aber sich nicht hat; genauer gesagt, sich nur im Umweg über andere und anders als ein Jemand hat, gibt der menschlichen Existenz in Gruppen ihren institutionellen Charakter." (Plessner 1961, 195.)

Culture is a set of patterns of action and thought. Like science, art, and language, also macro-institutions, such as the state, the administrative

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apparatus, the school, or the church, are the result of *Verkörperungen*. Plessner does not say this explicitly, but the aesthesiological approach leads to the view that ethics and politics, norms and institutions must also be a part of a philosophy of symbolic forms. The social body is a system of symbolic forms; but it is still a body, it has all its potentialities and limitations: “die Welt des täglichen Lebens [ist] nach ihren sinnlichen Evidenztypen ein Organismus” (Plessner 1923, 19). The ambivalences of the body, as a medium and a limiting boundary, as a unitary pole and a point of collision, also apply to the social body. Ambivalence can be defined as the contrast between community and society, familiarity and strangeness (Plessner 1923). No social body is devoid of these elements, and this implies a constant dose of conflict, whether internal or external, to the social groups. Another consequence is that, just as politics and ethics must be a part of the symbolic system of culture, this system likewise always has an ethical-political aspect: it generates and controls conflicts of value, taste, and knowledge, even to the point of physical conflict (Plessner 1931). The assumption of the excentric model leads to the consideration of the social body, not as an old-fashioned organicistic metaphor, but, on the contrary, as a description of advanced and functionally highly differentiated societies.

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## V. Aesthesiology of the public sphere

The first fundamental characteristic of a body is that it perceives and is perceived, moves and is moved, thus creating a network of reciprocal influences, openings, and delimitations. Being a person means being a character in front of a real or virtual audience. Society is the place, where this theatrical dimension is explicit. It provides a series of roles and rules of behavior, i.e., a cultural code. As aesthesiology teaches, this code is sensitive, it is articulated through the different senses. There are visual, olfactory, auditory, gustatory, and tactile patterns that guide behavior and the production of objects (cultural style). Norms and institutions also have a style, they determine forms of judgement and value. Although formulated in the abstract, judgements and evaluations are activated in the presence of precise sensory signals, to which one is more or less reactive according to cultural style. The senses have a cognitive and

at the same time an emotional relevance. Through the cooperation between perception and movement, they, on the one hand, show us the world, which is categorized according to a conceptual grammar, ranging from a maximum of abstraction (visual field) to a maximum of concreteness (tactile field, smell, taste), with the acoustic and linguistic fields (the typically communicative and participatory fields) at the center (Plessner 1923, 189 and 220). On the other hand, they generate a permanent emotional field due to the feedback of perception on psychosomatic states (*ibid.*, 293). We are immersed in a network of signs that convey messages; since these signs are perceived through one or more senses, the exchange of messages is never completely neutral, but produces atmospheres, moods, attitudes, and reactions (Griffero 2020). Usually, the sensory component remains in the background, because it is embedded in perceptual and behavioral patterns that have been introjected and act out of habit. But we must not forget that habit is precisely a *habitus*, a complex of morphological or behavioral traits that belong to a group; it is an attitude, a tendency, or a custom. The *habitus* regulates the interpersonal threshold of contact, gaze, sound, smell, and taste. Therefore, it has the function of social regulation and moral evaluation; precisely for this reason, the *habitus* emphasizes the most concrete side of morality, the moment, in which the norm embodies itself in perceptual signals and behaviors (Hettlage and Bellebaum 2016; Schloßberger 2019). It is no coincidence that the social rule comes into crisis when it runs into very different habits.

To be is to be perceived: the public image is aesthetic in nature, that is, first of all perceptive and then linked to taste, judgement, symbols and values (Carnevali 2020). In public space, each person is their own image, which is not really their own, because it stands between me and what others see of me. And it is precisely this intermediary function that makes it indispensable.

Being perceptually constructed, the public image leaves impressions, leaves a trace that then follows an autonomous communicative path. Our public image is a *Doppelgänger* (Plessner 1960b, 224) that circulates through words, memories, evaluations; it is strengthened and dispersed in a network of associations and references, which follow its own communicative criteria. What we say and think becomes a formula, the “part” played by the character. Our public alter ego reveals and hides us from ourselves. The public image is

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in fact not neutral, but always accompanied by judgement: it has a reputation, an esteem, a certain value (Origgi 2015). It is in public that one makes good and bad impressions, that one gains or loses respect, fame, or prestige. The public theater has a climate, a context that influences actors and spectators, perception and judgement. The context is formed by the audience, but also by the scene made up of places and things, artificial environments and products.

Social aesthesiology thus confirms the formative power of appearances: they do not add to substance and content, but shape them, give them a recognizable and assessable form. Without form, substance is not even perceived.

## VI. Ludus and drama

Plessner did not systematically develop the implications of human theatricality, nor did he develop the specifically social and ethical-political implications of aesthesiology. However, through the anthropological model of excentricity, he provided the theoretical basis for considering theater as a tool to describe the various aspects of excentricity. We have seen that there is a biological theater and a cultural theater of forms, which make possible a hermeneutic phenomenology of the human condition that develops in the interweaving of the laws of life and constructions of the spirit. The concept of *Verkörperung* summarizes this interweaving and allows it to be studied in its many variants, guided by the dual material and symbolic aspect of the body. The body as an organism that positions itself in relation to its limits and environment; the body as a sensory palette that marks the forms of culture; then the body as a social organism made up of characters, masks, roles, and institutions. This corporeal center always lives according to the dialectics with itself and with the other from itself; such a dialectics is what phenomenology and hermeneutics must analyze and understand through the theatrical model. Indeed, the model contains a theoretical framework concerning the reflexive relationship between observer and observed, fact and interpretation; and it contains the conceptual key to expounding human ambiguity in its multiple manifestations. The oppositional pairs of rational thought (being–appearance, truth–fiction, natural–artificial, internal–external, freedom–necessity, etc.) must become sufficiently fluid, in order to adapt to the nature of anthropological phenomena.

The macroscopic manifestation of theatricality is the social organization. I have tried to show the perspectives that open up if one applies aesthesiology to social phenomenology. These perspectives suggest fruitful encounters between the lines of research that often remain separate. Aesthesiology is a philosophy of symbolic forms on a corporeal basis, and it requires ethics and politics to be integrated into symbolic forms. The aesthesiology of the public sphere is precisely the attempt to give structural relevance to social appearances, to the ways, in which ethics and politics are embodied in a *habitus*, in perceptual and evaluative patterns. Although not systematically, Plessner gives us many important indications regarding the relationship between theater and ethics. It is no coincidence that soon after the publication of his aesthesiology (1923) he published an essay on social philosophy (Plessner 1924), in which an explicit theatrical paradigm of ethics is sketched out: morality lives on forms and rituals, on recognizable attitudes and virtues. Moral choice is linked to freedom, and freedom is rooted in an “ontologische Zweideutigkeit,” which would later be called excentricity. “Wir wollen uns sehen und gesehen werden, wie wir sind, und wir wollen ebenso uns verhüllen und ungekannt bleiben, denn hinter jeder Bestimmtheit unseres Seins schlummern die unsagbaren Möglichkeiten des Andersseins.” (Plessner 1924, 63.) The balance of ambiguity lies in the dramaturgy, the cultivated theater of appearances, based on the continuous readjustment between being and seeming, duty and power. Therefore, Plessner recovers the modern tradition of prudence as the art of governing oneself in the unpredictable play of circumstances (Accarino 2002; Kimmich 2002). Prudence is made up of a set of social virtues that turns conflicts into a ritual game, made up of indirect forms and modes of expression: diplomacy, ceremonial, aura, tact, manners, and *jeu d’esprit*. Given that “Öffentlichkeit [ist] das offene System des Verkehrs zwischen unverbundenen Menschen” (Plessner 1923, 95), the importance of the ceremonial brings out the *Spieltrieb* that already dominates the organic world, and gives it symbolic richness. Thus, “die Gesellschaft lebt allein vom Geist des Spiels” (ibid., 93–94). A complex interplay arises between the scene and the invisible background:

Takt ist [...] die Fähigkeit, jene unübersetzbare *Sprache der Erscheinungen* zu begreifen, welche die Situationen, die Personen

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ohne Worte in ihrer Konstellation, in ihrem Benehmen, in ihrer Physiognomie nach unergründlichen Symbolen des Lebens reden. Takt ist die Bereitschaft, auf diese feinsten Vibrationen der Umwelt anzusprechen, die willige Geöffnetheit, andere zu sehen und sich selber dabei aus dem Blickfeld auszuschalten, andere nach ihrem Maßstab und nicht dem eigenen zu messen. (Plessner 1924, 107; my emphasis.)

The theatrical vision of sociality thus emphasizes the relationship between ethics and aesthetics. This aesthetic component is often seen as the opposite of ethics, because it makes judgements superficial and transient, too closely linked to the moment and the passions. The weakness of the criticism is that it overlooks the very aesthesiological matrix of the spirit: ethics is a part of culture, and culture is experienced in the social body. The moment of abstraction is intertwined with empathy, contexts, and circumstances. Moral principles are embodied in people and things, and thus convey expressive, communicative, and performative properties. On the one hand, this approach highlights the importance of personal virtues, which are intrinsically social; on the other hand, it highlights the importance of the environmental context. The scene is in fact an essential component of the theatrical action. Social aesthesiology thus provides the elements for an ethics of virtues with a strong focus on the cultural component, where culture means not only knowledge, but the configuration of the environment, care for the scene, where everyday life takes place. The ethics of principles falls short without an appropriate *habitus*.

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The current society of the spectacle, where empty appearance and ephemeral fiction triumph, however, seems to be a denial of the ethical role of aesthetics. But this is precisely because there has been a separation between ethics and aesthetics; the public sphere has lost its theatrical value by mixing—without any solid cultural mediation—the impersonality of the *Mitwelt* with extreme personal narcissism. The substitutability of roles in the public sphere, which implies assuming a constraint and maintaining a distance from the role, becomes pure play, an opportunity for constant change, without constraint and commitment. All that is left of theater is *ludus* without dramaturgy; drama is transformed into a play without symbolic and formative power. Favored by technology, *Verkörperung* is transformed

into weightless *Entkörperung* (deprivation of the body). Anthropologically speaking, *Entkörperung* indicates death, afterlife, absence; it is the existential experience of nothingness and unphantomability, to which the metaphysical sphere of myth and religion is linked (Plessner 1961, 209–214). Instead, we observe that the pleasure-loving playful society of the spectacle removes this unsettling background. Without an evocative background, which links the visible and invisible, the bodies themselves, their symbolic significance, become empty. Only the mask remains, without the person; the scene without the power of representation. All this happens not through an excess of theater, but through its disappearance: what remains are only images (reality as show). The seriousness of the spectacle, the mediating role of virtue, the commitment to give substance to forms, which begins with the recognition of the limits that forms impose, has disappeared. Thus, it is precisely in the liquid society of the spectacle that we need to rediscover the weight of representation, restoring to it all its dramatic meaning: in order to be able to have a worthy life in the flux of appearances.

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