“I am a place”: *Aletheia* as aesthetic and political resistance in Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing*

Joakim Wrethed*

*Department of English, Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden*

**Abstract**

The article investigates the aesthetic and political power of Margaret Atwood’s 1972 novel *Surfacing*. It argues that the novel’s perennial vitality is partly explained by Jacques Rancière’s theory about the aesthetic regime of art that highlights the tension between art for art’s sake and art as a political instrument. By means of phenomenological methodology and concepts, mainly derived from Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the examination uncovers an experiential aesthetics intimately intertwined with the protagonist’s perceptions throughout the narrative. These perceptions and impressions are permeated by a sense of semi-religious revelation. But here they are primarily seen from an epistemological perspective through the dominance of immediacy (denoted by the Greek *aletheia*) over verificational dimensions (denoted by the Roman *veritas*). These predominantly sensory aspects of *Surfacing* make up the aesthetic nerve that is linked to the political impact of the work. *Aletheia* functions as a promise of emancipation since it transcends the political division of the sensory, that is, art for art’s sake and art as life. But, Atwood’s work also upholds this separation since *aletheia* is ultimately autonomous, which in turn sustains the autonomy of the novel. It is claimed that the persistent status of *Surfacing*—and thereby its sustained political impact—is ultimately due to its aesthetic integrity. The novel’s more explicit political concerns of ecocriticism and feminism are secondary in relation to the force of *aletheia*.

**Keywords:** phenomenology; epistemology; aesthetics; perception; enframing; Rancière; the flesh; Heidegger; Merleau-Ponty; ecocriticism

The politics of literature is not the politics of its writers. It does not deal with their personal commitment to the social and political issues and struggles of their times. Nor does it deal with the modes of representation of political events or the social structure and the social struggles in their books. The syntagma “politics of literature” means that literature “does” politics as literature—that there is a specific link between politics as a definite way

---

*Correspondence to: Joakim Wrethed, Department of English, Stockholm University, 106 91 Stockholm, Sweden. Email: joakim.wrethed@english.su.se*

© 2015 J. Wrethed. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), allowing third parties to copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format and to remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially, provided the original work is properly cited and states its license.

Citation: Journal of Aesthetics & Culture, Vol. 7, 2015 http://dx.doi.org/10.3402/jac.v7.28020
Margaret Atwood’s second novel Surfacing (1972) is an extraordinary artistic achievement and at this point in time we may safely conclude that it has become a modern classic. Clearly, the work contains a range of complexly intertwined themes and motifs with the potential of explaining its perennial power. Without doubt, it is an overtly political novel and feminism, ecocriticism, and gender stereotypes are dominant topics in the narrative, but that alone cannot fully explicate its persisting political power. Without doubt, it is an overtly political novel and feminism, ecocriticism, and gender stereotypes are dominant topics in the narrative, but that alone cannot fully explicate its persisting aesthetico-political authority. Charlotte Walker Mendez has stated about Surfacing that “[r]arely does one find a work of fiction that is as conceptual as this one and yet as fictionally, aesthetically alive.” This enigmatic tension is partly what motivates the inquiry below. Theoretically speaking, it is here suggested that the aesthetic strength and political power of Surfacing have more to do with existential and phenomenological aspects than has hitherto been openly acknowledged. Thus, the driving force of the investigation is partly that not much of the criticism published so far really tries to get at the elaborate phenomenological dimension of the text in focus. As a consequence, the politics of Atwood’s aesthetics in this novel has not been properly elucidated in their entirety. It is the purpose here to conduct a phenomenological reading to reveal the covertly present political aesthetics that underpin Surfacing.

Margaret Atwood’s poetics have been highlighted by Branko Gorjup in his “Margaret Atwood’s poetry and poetics.” Even though he mainly focuses on Atwood’s poetry, the central claim has relevance for the aesthetic dimension scrutinised here. Building on Sherrill Grace’s work, Gorjup states that “Atwood’s poetics of metamorphosis contains [Grace’s idea of] ‘violent duality’ of oppositional forces […] but also offers a way of transcending it.” The governing idea below is partly related to such a transcendence, but in my reading, the potential transcendence also harbours a tension that needs to be highlighted. To clarify the aesthetic discourse that functions as a backdrop to the analysis, we may turn to the theories of Jacques Rancière. The connection between Rancière’s work and Atwood’s novel may initially seem weak or even problematic, but as gradually will become clear the core of his theory clearly illustrates a point to be made about Surfacing and its aesthetics. In his text “Aesthetics as Politics,” Rancière carefully sorts out what he labels “the aesthetic regime of art.” Mainly, his argument manifests that the aesthetico-political discourse of contemporary art is governed by a longstanding tension between “the politics of the becoming-life of art and the politics of the resistant form.” This strain is particularly prominent in Atwood’s novel and its energy creates the persisting political vitality that overrides its more explicitly thematised political concerns. As Rancière explains:

It is therefore as an autonomous form of experience that art concerns and infringes on the political division of the sensible. The aesthetic regime of art institutes the relation between the forms of identification of art and the forms of political community in such a way as to challenge in advance every opposition between autonomous art and heteronomous art, art for art’s sake and art in the service of politics […] For aesthetic autonomy is not that autonomy of artistic “making” celebrated by modernism. It is the autonomy of a form of sensory experience. And it is that experience which appears as the germ of a new humanity, of a new form of individual and collective life. Rancière here pinpoints the underlying tension that governs the contemporary discourse on aesthetics. Walker Mendez tries to capture something similar when pointing out the peculiar conceptual–sensory duality of Surfacing. To some extent, it is possible to argue that Atwood stages the “opposition between the Christian power of incarnation of the word and the Jewish prohibition on representation […]”. This may be seen in the nameless protagonist’s striving to become the Word without language and her attempts at abolishing representation through the symbolic act of destroying the male characters’ film towards the end of the narrative. In accordance with Rancière’s contention, the thesis here proffers that as an aesthetic object Surfacing is most strongly political through aspects that do not primarily lend themselves to political agendas. Its aesthetico-political persistence and power consist of a particular phenomenology of aesthetics, which has got to do with “sensory experience” for the protagonist as well as for any reader of the novel. Concisely put, the novel has a very precise aesthetic structure that presents sensory experience as a possibly emancipatory dimension not entirely locked.
in the artwork, but concomitantly this factor establishes the unpresentability of the source of these forces, which also upholds the autonomous Other of the artwork itself. Thus, the novel as a work of art is built on the contradiction Rancière draws attention to. I claim that this applies both to certain thematic levels of the novel and to the novel as a whole as a work of art handed over to the readership. The obvious political topics of the novel, most clearly feminism and ecocriticism, draw their energy from this underlying aesthetic contradiction. Below I shall elucidate how this phenomenological dimension of the work is constituted and how it functions. But before turning to the phenomenological concepts more in detail and the actual readings and analyses, I will provide a brief background of *Surfacing* criticism.

For the purposes here it will suffice to highlight the major strands of writing on *Surfacing* to map out the theoretical terrain in which the phenomenological investigation below needs to be placed. Over 40 years of accumulation of *Surfacing* interpretations obviously means that the assemblage of criticism has become both vast and divergent, which in itself further proves the multifaceted poetic impact of the work. Since feminism is such a conspicuous feature of the novel, many variations of that theme are thoroughly covered at this point. These studies branch out in, and are often combined with, theories about identity in terms of selfhood—the split self in particular—narcissism, and the discursive space provided for any possible female identity in a staunchly patriarchal world. Identity in general is in turn frequently linked to a potential Canadian national identity. In addition, such readings take into account the ecocritical aspects that are intricately interlaced with the novel’s notion of femininity. There are also readings that place emphasis on Amerindian myth as well as Christian faith and quest, while others have focused on the prominent function of logic and language. The religiously coloured interpretations make up the territory in which the following investigation partly needs to be located, since it deals with facets of belief, knowledge, and truth. The claim forwarded here is mainly that the so-called quest has a distinct aesthetic form as regards the epistemological implications of Atwood’s prose work. *Surfacing* is a novel of aesthetico-political resistance as well as a phenomenological work on the notion of truth in a postmodern world of uncertainty and materialist decay. In what follows, I contend that it is the idiosyncratic aesthetic form in combination with the phenomenological rendering of the concepts of truth and the body that constitute the novel’s eccentric vitality.

Before probing into the literary text itself, some theoretical background has to be presented and central conceptual connections need to be clarified. Phenomenology may be said to be the science of that which is so obvious that it may go unnoticed. The only presupposition that phenomenology brings is something seemingly tautological and simplistic, namely that any appearance does actually appear. This particular approach is in other words wholly a science ofappearings. It does not assume that what is perceived or apprehended is worldly or unworldly, existing or non-existing, physical or mental, subjective or objective. Phenomenology brackets such dichotomies, which in technical terminology is called reduction or epi\o\e\h\ê. Ultimately, a phenomenologist pays close attention to how phenomena are being constituted. In the context of *Surfacing*, this philosophical attitude and scientific methodology has relevance in two interrelated ways. First, the novel’s aesthetic structure to some extent performs phenomenology, for instance, through the protagonist’s journey towards a primitive or primordial state, which partly imitates a radical phenomenological reduction. Second, the poetic style of the prose, with its meticulously crafted details, consistently begs for patient scrutiny of the phenomena themselves and close readings of things that are not immediately apparent, even though they have immediate appearance. Martin Heidegger’s thorough examination of the origins of technology provides a suitable conceptualisation of the phenomenology pursued here, which in turn comments on ecocritical as well as aesthetic topics in Atwood’s novel.

To a great extent, principal Heideggerian concepts combined with Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s insights about the phenomenal body guide the analysis. Heidegger’s thinking basically forwards the idea that technology is itself originally a bringing-forth, that is, the Greek *poi\e\s\is*, in much the same way that artistic and natural bringing-forth are fundamentally interrelated:

Not only handcraft manufacture, not only artistic and poetical bringing into appearance and concrete imagery, is a bringing-forth, *poi\e\s\is*. *Physis* also, the arising of something
J. Wrethed

from out of itself, is a bringing-forth, poie\`sis. Physis is indeed poie\`sis in the highest sense. For what presences by means of physis has the bursting open belonging to bringing-forth, e.g. the bursting of a blossom into bloom, in itself (en heauto\`). 19

As strongly linked to physis, technology “is a way of revealing.” 20 What has gone wrong in modernity is that technology’s mode of bringing-forth has conformed to a certain mode of revealing, which Heidegger calls Enframing (Gestell). In that way of coming forth, nature is “standing-reserve,” which means that it is always already exploitable matter. 21

These aspects of physis and technology are present in Surfacing. The novel itself, its protagonist as well as its reader are drawn into the force of bringing-forth in such a way that technology as Enframing is radically exposed and challenged. To further make clear how this phenomenological dimension works in Atwood’s novel, Heidegger’s different modes of coming forth need to be combined with Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the Flesh. According to Merleau-Ponty, the Flesh is “not in the world.” 22 As experiential beings, humans have two distinguishable but not separate bodies, since the body is “at once phenomenal body and objective body.”

Thus, the Flesh is the chiasmatic and invisible intersection of the sensing and sensed body, that is, the phenomenal and objective body, respectively. In Surfacing, the Flesh is the aspatial “zone” in which all types of bringing-forth manifest the force that serves as the novel’s phenomenological and aethetico-political resistance, which will be further elucidated below.

Perception as an indispensable part of lived experience is of course predominant in phenomenology as well as in the novel itself. In the narrative the impressions are filtered through the unnamed narrator’s mind. Quite often the nameless protagonist provides reflective commentary and additional imagery that give perceptions and impressions a critical edge. Especially, in the early part of the narrative she compares many impressions to her childhood memories, which indicates that the present contains the past, even when it comes to straightforward perceptions:

Now I’m in the village, walking through it, waiting for the nostalgia to hit, for the cluster of nondescript buildings to be irradiated with inner light like a plug-in crèche, as it has been so often in memory; but nothing happens.

It hasn’t gotten any bigger, these days children probably move to the city. The same two-story frame houses with nasturtiums on the windowsills and squared roof-corners, motley lines of washing trailing from them like the tails of kites; though some of the houses are slicker and have changed color.

The tension between the expectations of memories and the actual present perceptions is obvious. The dichotomy of past and present is at work but its validity is questioned in the flow of the text. Potential memories of the past are revised by present impressions. Three important things may be stated already here. First, the past and the present co-exist in the narrator’s experience. Second, as part of the epistemological quest, any adjustment can be made in either direction, that is, the past can correct the present as well as the present can correct the past. As gradually becomes clearer when the narrative progresses, the past seems to increase its power to modify the present. Third, two types of truth are manifested throughout the novel. These varieties of truth may be elucidated with a phenomenological distinction. Roman veritas denotes the correction phase (i.e., the corroboration of any truth claim or theory), whereas Greek aletheia is the revelatory level itself that makes the rectification achievable at all. Thus, aletheia is what enables any instantiation of veritas. The “frame houses with nasturtiums on the windowsills” is a moment of aletheia. They merely appear, without the protagonist in any way being able to stop them from appearing. In coming to givenness they contribute to the impression of the present that refashions the protagonist’s overly nostalgic memory of the village. It is a central claim in what follows that aletheia structures the whole of Surfacing in more prominent ways than has hitherto been recognised. Generally speaking, aletheia overrides the significantly binary organisation of the text. 25

The epistemological quest of Surfacing is apparent to any reader. The protagonist is looking for her lost father out in the Canadian wilderness. Searching for something to be found obviously involves veritas. She looks for verifiable facts and clues that she can collect and utilize to draw some form of logical conclusion: “My brain was rushing, covering over the bad things and filling the empty spaces with an embroidery of calculations and numbers, I needed to finish, I had never finished anything.
To be exact, to condense myself to a pinpoint, impaling a fact, a certainty."26 In all, that aspect of the protagonist’s journey imitates the analytical mind and rational methodology of the missing father. It implicates the need for categorisation, logic, and a transparent sign system or language. Yet, that demand for accuracy is from the first to the last pages of the novel accompanied and dominated by perceptual and affective aletheia, which in itself seems to be without telos: “The screen door has a BLACK CAT CIGARETTES handle; I open it and step into the store smell, the elusive sweetish odor given off by the packaged cookies and the soft-drink cooler.”27 These short perceptual passages serve as reminders of the fact that ultimately there is a level of experience that impales the narrator rather than the other way around. We find nothing of the narrator’s usual commentary or reflective elaborations here. The smell in the warehouse permeates the overall impression. Moreover, the seemingly insignificant, often poetic, point-like impressions keep re-appearing, creating a continuous intra-textual counter narrative to the articulated numbness of the narrator. She claims to be without feeling, that she is “the wrong half, detached, terminal” and that the missing half is the only one she really could live through.28 But that ostensibly lost part is incessantly alive all through the narrative undermining the protagonist’s thematised statements: “Near the dock there were some water skippers, surface tension holding them up; the fragile shadows of the dents where their feet touched fell on the sand underwater, moving when they moved.”29 There is no layer of reflective clarification or association here. The perception is plain and precise. Shadows following every move of the surface indentations in the way the affective stratum of the narrator’s selfhood follows as the force of aletheia throughout the narrative. These perceptive glimpses are micro-revelations that in themselves attest to the aesthetic dimension of the novel. The narrator records these appearances as if cursorily and they seem to lack significance and power. But it is precisely in that way they come to be part of the aesthetic resistance. They foreshadow the major revelation in chapter 17 when the protagonist is exposed to the memory of her aborted foetus.

This aesthetic resistance continuously makes itself known as the narrative progresses. Even distorted perceptions, memories, and impressions have a phase of aletheia. When the protagonist disfigures her own vision by pressing her fingers into her eyes, impressions seem to disturb the dichotomy of inner and outer reality: “I pressed my fingers into my eyes, hard, to make the pool of blackness ringed with violent color. Release, red spreading back in, abrupt as pain. The secret had come clear, it had never been a secret, I’d made it one, that was easier. My eyes came open, I began to arrange.”30 The insight here is partly about her father’s project, which to the protagonist at that point means that he probably did not go insane before he disappeared, which was her previous theory. Thus, this has got to do with the process of veritas. But the perception itself contains “violent colour” which is inseparable from the experience itself. The abruptness of the pain-like red is the whole of the experience at that moment. In that sense, something that is irrational, not ordered or “arrange[d],” can still function as truth-arrival in terms of aletheia. Even though that distorted perception does not directly give rise to the protagonist’s insight, it draws attention to a zone in which things come to be. As we shall see, this pre-rational realm is of immense importance in any holistic inspection of the novel. At one point, the narrator remembers the photographs in high school history books, which she used to frame with her own scribblings: “The generals and historic moments looked better framed. If you put your eye down close to the photographs they disintegrated into grey dots.”31 This also indicates the pre-rational realm that does not have a fixed form but in which the coming-into-being of entities itself is highlighted, rather than their form and whatness. Thus again, attention is drawn to the phenomenon of aletheia. The conglomerate of points is pre-linguistic and does not make sense, but the piercing factor of something appearing is there as an inevitable force shaping the protagonist’s experience. The disintegration of form is still a coming-into-being of this very formlessness.

Aletheia is not a specific location but an everywhere. Nevertheless, it may be conceptualised as a zone and as the narrative progresses the protagonist seems to want to become this very region herself: “I am not an animal or a tree, I am the thing in which the trees and animals move and grow, I am a place.”32 But the journey up to that more explicit insight is pervaded with seemingly insignificant
perceptions that perpetuate the pattern of truth-arrival: “Bluebottle fly near my elbow, metallic abdomen gleaming, sucker tongue walking on the oilcloth like a seventh foot.”33 The simile here zooms in on the poetic aspect of aletheia, since this is also the field of creative activity and energy. The narrator translates the movements through poetic imagination, but the original coming-into-being of the fly as an appearance is the appearance itself shaping the phenomenal body as a recipient of the unfolding phenomenon. The journey into the Canadian wilderness has apparently enhanced the protagonist’s sensitivity to this pre-rational and Canadian wilderness has apparently enhanced the protagonist’s sensitivity to this pre-rational and pre-linguistic zone: “Above the trees streaky mackerel clouds are spreading in over the sky, paint on a pre-reflectively connects with the “soft feel of the air before rain.”38 This phenomenological dimension is inevitably always beyond the reach of the Enframing process Heidegger draws attention to. Wind brushes over them but brings with it waves of visual perceptions, reflections of the moon on water rippling it visually as the undulating sound of moving leaves ripples. The loon’s cry as a voice, functioning as an overall experiential semi-linguistic statement, which may not make sense from a rational point of view, but as a powerful phenomenon in its own right, it obviously affects the protagonist strongly. It is not perfectly transparent if she is freezing or if she feels some kind of awe when confronted with this synaesthetic orchestration of perceptions, but it is completely clear that she is more attuned to these phenomena than to her boyfriend sitting next to her. She presumes that his rocking to and fro “may mean he’s happy,” but by formulating it in that way, she implicitly states that she does not really care.39 Her attention is elsewhere.

In a subtly seductive and poetic way, the reader of Surfacing is gradually drawn into the same attunement as the protagonist. This is so skilfully done that the more crucial functions of aletheia in the work still come as revelatory and surprising phenomena. This applies especially to the more covertly embedded details: “The blueberries were only beginning to ripen, the dots of them showing against the green like first rain pocking the lake.”40 Appearances enhance one another by analogous shaping. The visual field in terms of Flesh is a surface of tiny indentations. Moreover, the coming forth of blueberries is further emphasised by them being “so blue they seemed lit up from within.”41 Blueness appears as having an almost supernatural glow. When being picked and dropped “into the cup they made a plink like water.”42 In coming together in such a way, these perceptions draw attention to the Flesh as a synaesthetic conglomeration of sensuous rhythm and shaping. These phenomena are often just there seemingly without any significance or subversive power. But it is precisely by paying attention to this build-up that we can analytically approach the work’s central aesthetico-political energy. The narrator’s apparent straightforward telling of what happens to her and her friends when spending or killing time in the wilderness is permeated by an intricate philosophical discourse that combines existential angst

As Shannon Hengen has suggested, “the setting seems to offer a kind of grace.”37 But this is also something more than “setting” in any conventional use of the term. The echo phenomenon is here apt. Perceptions in general reappear as echoing sounds, perpetually shaping and re-shaping the Flesh. On this level the “warm—cool and fluid” air
with phenomenological opulence. The “plink” of blueberries falling into a cup makes up an aural connection with an early givenness of “gravel pinging off the underside of the car.” Physis is here manifestly poèsis.

To be sure, phenomena are intra-textually and poetically scrutinised, but this scrutiny is always fortified by altheia. If canoe paddles “twin in the lake,” they give rise to the phenomenology of doubling and pulls the reader towards the realm of primordial experience. If space is “infinite space or […] no space,” it does not matter that it is presented as an “illusion,” since the whole notion of illusion is on one level of Surfacing problematised and in certain instances even eliminated.

The sun has set, we slide back through the gradual dusk. Loon voices in the distance; bats flitter past us, dipping over the water surface, flat calm now, the shore things, white-gray rocks and dead trees, doubling themselves in the dark mirror. Around us the illusion of infinite space or of no space, ourselves and the obscure shore which it seems we could touch, the water between an absence. The canoe’s reflection floats with us, the paddles twin in the lake. It’s like moving on air, nothing beneath us holding us up; suspended, we drift home.

The rational mind would be quick to see the paddle as real and its reflection as unreal, or at least to verge on phenomena that are secondary or derivative. But on the level of altheia, they are on par with the conglomeration of dots in the close up of the printed image referred to above. The reflected realm does not primarily draw attention to an ontological split but to the seamless streaming of experiential reality. The fact that space comes out as a seemingly unresolvable paradox is apposite, since spatial and temporal distances dissolve as altheia. “Loon voices” appear here again, disturbing the rational (linguistic) versus irrational (experiential) dichotomy. These pre-rational “voices” linked with the sense that the shore at a distance could be touched, together draw attention to this truth realm, which the protagonist later learns is an inevitable life-force. As the attunement gradually becomes stronger as the narrative progresses, the narrator eventually explicitly states that “there are no longer any rational points of view.”

This means that the other irrational pole holding up the binary equilibrium somehow dissolves too. The narrative prepares the reader for this state of affairs long before it is clearly articulated. In the passage above, nothing seems to support the characters’ movement, which suits the overall sense in the narrative of the protagonist as being carried by the “nothingness” of life itself, with its ruthless verve, paradoxically consisting of devastation and redemption; despair and hope. This potency also functions as the aesthetico-political resistance in Rancière’s sense. Quite contradictorily it both transcends and upholds the dividing line between life and art. It transcends in terms of revelatory experience being a phenomenon that appears in other contexts of human life, but upholds in terms of being an autonomous phenomenon. As an aesthetic principle, it cannot be desired or appropriated. Surfacing is autonomous as an aesthetico-political object. It becomes a political statement by maintaining its aesthetic glow and thereby it continuously draws attention to its political potential. It is this peculiar tension Walker Mendez emphasises when stating that Surfacing is “conceptual” yet at the same time “aesthetically alive.”

It is “the shock of the aistheton” that ultimately carries the political dimension of Surfacing.

The novel’s quest is punctuated by instantiations and interlacings of phenomena that do not seem to have any primary thematic function. Even when the protagonist performs rather dull everyday chores, things appear with a momentary glow of surreptitious significance. Washing up the plates, she cursorily notices “the water turning reddish blue, vein color.” Again, a concise and precise description that is an impression and an affect. Bluish colour, drawing attention to blood, which in some sense is a piece of nature pulled towards the physicality of animals and humans. Water as the circulation of blood. But these are associations. It is also plainly what the narrator sees. However, combined with another apparently fleetingly passing moment of dubious thematic importance, a pattern on another level begins to settle.

The sunset was red, a clear tulip color paling to flesh webs, membrane. Now there are only streaks of it, mauve and purple, sky visible through the window, divided by the window squares and then by the interlacing branches, leaves overlapping leaves.

Again, the sky is tissue-like as a physical body. Darkening to shades of blue it appears through the limiting features framing it. But the interlacing of branches and layered leaves draw attention to the
interweaving of phenomena in the protagonist’s experiential journey. Her felt detachment from herself is continuously being re-stitched by the novel’s semi-concealed affective stratum of aletheia, which is the Flesh of the novel. The continuous perceptual interweaving progressively unlocks the unnamed character’s life to herself. What she thinks she is searching for in her quest in terms of veritas, arrives through the backdoor of her general experience. As the phenomenal body gradually gains power, it makes itself known in a very specific way. Not as an object before the gaze of the protagonist, but as an aspatial “zone” of arrival. This is the chiasmatic intersection of sensing and sensed, which is neither body nor world but Flesh.

I walk down to the lake. It is flat calm, the water is pollen-streaked, mist is drifting up off the bays and from behind the islands, the sun burning it away as it rises, the sun itself hot and bright as light through a lens. Something glimmers out on the surface, a swimming animal or a dead log; when there is no wind things venture out from the shore. The air smells of earth, midsummer. The lake comes out as a straightforward visual perception. Strands of pollen in the water. Veritas has lost its importance since the whatness of the glimmering object in the water does not have to be determined. That teleological process has been weakened and the smell of earth merely appears. Nothing can be done with these things, they lack utility, they resist Enframing, but as appearings they constitute a vitalising force. Even death may be seen as part of physis as poēsis in the Heideggerian sense:

The water was covered with lily pads, the globular yellow lilies with their thick center snouts pushing up from among them. It swarmed with leeches, I could see them undulating sluggishly under the brown surface. Vegetation drives its way up, the immense power of growth almost violent, as a colour may seem violent in its clean appearance when the protagonist earlier pushed her fingers into her own eyes distorting her field of vision. The undulating movements of the leeches further emphasising the force of becoming. This is before the others have left the island, but the attunement is similar when the narrator towards the end gradually moves into that which from an outside perspective resembles insanity.

This is not a merely descriptive phase transporting the protagonist and reader through a snippet of biology. Here the “flowers rise,” that is, come forth. Death is not terminus, but “metamorphosis,” which further accentuates the process of aletheia. Personification abounds since the roots are “skinless” and the leaves of the sundew are given as being “toenail-sized.” The flesh of physis is not the same as phenomenological Flesh, but the ongoing transformations are similar. The surfacer’s attunement is continuously an engagement with the ways of the Flesh, which gradually becomes a shift from life as an object before her gaze into the life that she always already is, that is, the shadow-land that always precedes any notion of selfhood. Within the constraints of Enframing, these affinities have ceased to make themselves manifest. In the coming forth of technology in the narrative, techne has lost its original meaning, but this is something the protagonist and the narrative as a whole consistently resists in the form of poēsis. This is also what beckons as the aesthetico-political resistance. Atwood’s novel is at its political peak when it is concerned with phenomena that seem to be at the furthest possible distance from politics in any ordinary sense.

To further accentuate this pattern in Surfacing, we may juxtapose descriptive passages that are seemingly distant in terms of the protagonist’s development towards a more radical separation from civilised life. In itself, this configuration brings forth the verb-oriented drive of the text, which pulls a dimension of the poetic growth of the prose away from the more noun-oriented ordering that the protagonist thinks she is seeking in her epistemological quest. Thus, it is not her will but the pull of her attunement that rules.

The plants are flourishing, they grow almost visibly, sucking moisture up through the roots and succulent stems, their leaves sweating,
flashed in the sunrays to a violent green, weeds and legitimate plants alike, there is no difference. Under the ground the worms twine, pink veins.54

As the force of *physis* obliterates any rationalised differentiation between domesticated and wild vegetation, the boundary between perceived and imagined reality is disturbed. Thus, *physis* and *poēsis* are manifested as the domain of the Flesh and *aletheia*. The worms are presented as a poetic vision, which without closer scrutiny would pass as a perception. Imaginative vision here transcends perception and again the power of *aletheia* is accentuated.

In the decisive chapter 17, when the protagonist dives for the rock paintings, the zone of *aletheia* shows its importance in the narrative with full force. When she sees herself as a Christ-like figure, the reader perhaps first notices yet another version of the split self-theme: “My other shape was in the water, not my reflection but my shadow, foreshortened, outline blurred, rays streaming out from around the head.”55 But more pertinent to the present investigation is the blurriness combined with the constitution of the full perception. It is not the “reflection” but the “shadow” she sees and the figure itself does not indicate a split, but an amalgamation since any shadow always remains attached to that which it is a shadow of. The streaming rays of light do not illuminate the shadow, but the shade is the dark centre, the shape of the protagonist which itself is never really seen. This shape is continuously being shaped. Its fuzziness indicates the region of coming-into-being. When diving further and further down, “sliding through the lake strata,” the narrator feels “the water unfocusing [her] eyes.”56 It is precisely this malfunctioning perception that opens up for the shadow-region of *aletheia*. Being epistemologically at a loss somehow entails the opening up for truth-arrival in the perpetually streaming Flesh. The diver feels her “eyes straining, not knowing what shape to expect.”57 Indeed, out of the darkness of the water, which is distinct but not separate from the obscure depths of the protagonist herself, comes the formless truth, taking a temporary form to manifest its presence. What form it takes is not important. It is the affective implications of this arrival itself that shows its immense power.

Pale green, then darkness, layer after layer, deeper than before, seabottom; the water seemed to have thickened, in it pinprick lights flicked and darted, red and blue, yellow and white, and I saw they were fish, the chasmdwellers, fins lined with phosphorescent sparks, teeth neon […] I watched the fish, they swam like patterns on closed eyes, my legs and arms were weightless, free-floating […] It was there but it wasn’t a painting, it wasn’t on the rock. It was below me, drifting towards me from the furthest level where there was no life, a dark oval trailing limbs. It was blurred but it had eyes, they were open, it was something I knew about, a dead thing, it was dead.58

The simile here of the fish as dots of light making patterns behind closed eyes is extremely important. As we have seen, there is an intra-textual problematisation of the inner-versus-outer dichotomy. *Aletheia* and the Flesh do not respect this constructed division. The protagonist is “free-floating” similar to the way she earlier felt “like moving on air” when paddling with her friends.59

The same existential groundlessness appears here providing the aspatial zone of coming forth. The arrival of the dead entity is the arrival of the death affectively present in the protagonist’s life. Coming into unconcealment here is simultaneously and paradoxically an indication of life at its utmost intensity. This is the ultimate moment and locus of no escape. In Carol P. Christ’s words this is to be regarded as “a revelation from great powers,”60 *Surfacing* suggests that this does not happen within the protagonist as an isolated phenomenon. Neither does it happen outside the narrator. It happens on the cusp of the world as we know it. The focus is not strictly on the whatness of the entity, but on the truth-process itself. Moreover, the determination of the diver’s quest in terms of *veritas* is textually accentuated: “[. . .] I was elated, it was down there, I would find it [. . .].”61 That enhances the effect of the reversal of this intended impaling of a fact. What comes to her is part of the autonomous flow of life and it is nothing the protagonist can will into being or in any way control. *Veritas* is overrun by *aletheia*. The narrator contemplates her father’s scientific exertions: “He had discovered new places, new oracles, they were things he was seeing the way I had seen, true vision; at the end, after the failure of logic.”62 This vision implies an attunement to life in its primitive
flowing. It is not true as opposed to false, because then we would still be in the realm of veritas. It is true in terms of aletheia, that is, as pre-rational revelation.

To conclude, we have seen that aletheia is a prominent force all through the narrative. As a phenomenon it draws attention to the autonomy of certain strata of experience. The protagonist gradually becomes part of that process. In all, this also has an aesthetico-political function. Surfacing is a political work of art that promises emancipation, but not primarily and most forcefully as a persuasive political argument. In its phenomenological and aesthetic structure, it manages the difficult tightrope walk between upholding itself as something distinct from ordinary experience, yet at the same time transcending the constructed division between fiction and lived experience in terms of the phenomenal body and the Flesh. Rancière articulates the contradiction that resides at the centre of contemporary aesthetic discourse:

The politics of art in the aesthetic regime of art, or rather its metapolitics, is determined by this founding paradox: in this regime, art is art insofar as it is also non-art, or is something other than art. We therefore have no need to contrive any pathetic ends for modernity or imagine that a joyous explosion of postmodernity has put an end to the great modernist adventure of art’s autonomy or of emancipation through art. There is no postmodern rupture. There is a contradiction that is originary and unceasingly at work. The work’s solitude carries a promise of emancipation. But the fulfilment of that promise amounts to the elimination of art as a separate reality, its transformation into a form of life.63

In Surfacing, Atwood stages this tension in at least two ways. First, the aesthetic structure of the novel mirrors the protagonist’s movement towards an autonomous realm. This revelatory dimension promises emancipation by forwarding an aesthetico-political statement. Second, as an aesthetic object, the novel itself upholds its own autonomy vis-à-vis lived experience and thereby it gains an enormous amount of political power by not fully becoming a form of life. The experiential dimension of Surfacing pursued here seemingly transcends the dichotomy of art for art’s sake and art as potentially exercising political power in the experiential realm of any reader. But that which sustains the autonomy on both sides of the dichotomy is the zone of aletheia, which itself essentially is always unpresentable. The fundamental political power of Atwood’s poetics lies in drawing attention to this paradoxical state of affairs. Thus the novel resists becoming a mere political pamphlet, but by doing that it gains a much more far reaching and persisting political power handed over to new generations of readers. This intricate poetic endeavour clearly manifests Margaret Atwood’s skill as a writer and emphatically consolidates her position as one of the most prominent contemporary authors in the world.

Notes
1. In SubStance 33.1 (2004): 10–24.
2. The novel is listed in Harold Bloom’s Western Canon, The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages (London: Papermac, 1996), 561. In the reprinted Virago paperback version (London: Virago Press, 1997), copyright page, there is a list of the years it has been reprinted up until 2004: “1982, 1983, 1984, 1985, 1987, 1988, 1989, 1990, 1991, 1994 (twice), 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999 (twice), 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004.” Without any doubt, Surfacing keeps attracting new generations of readers.
3. Charlotte Walker Mendez, “Loon Voice: Lying Words and Speaking World in Atwood’s Surfacing,” in Margaret Atwood: Reflection and Reality, ed. James M. Haule and Beatrice Mendez-Egle (Edinburg, TX: Pan American University, 1987), 89.
4. Sonia Mycak mainly analyses other works by Atwood in her monograph In Search of the Split Subject: Psychoanalysis, Phenomenology, and the Novels of Margaret Atwood (Toronto: ECW Press, 1996).
5. Branko Gorjup, “Margaret Atwood’s poetry and poetics,” in The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood, ed. Coral Ann Howells (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 130.
6. In his article “The Politics of Literature,” Rancière mainly bases his reasoning on literature on the French canon of the 19th century, but the central argument is essentially the same as in “Aesthetics as Politics”, which I also utilize in the analysis. I focus on the tension between art for art’s sake and art as political action and suggest that this tension is applicable also to Atwood’s novel. In “The Politics of Literature”, Rancière claims that “[w]hen ‘art for art’s sake’ wants to undo its link to the prose of democracy, it has to undo itself” (In SubStance 33.1 (2004): 22). The point here is that this is reversible. Atwood’s novel can only be fully overtly political by dissolving itself as literature. By means of the concept of aletheia, I simply argue that Surfacing is political on another more profound level.

J. Wrethed

(10)

(page number not for citation purpose)
7. Jacques Rancière, “Aesthetics as Politics,” in *Aesthetics and Its Discontents* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 44.
8. Ibid., 32.
9. Ibid., 20.
10. A quite common objection to phenomenological studies of literature is that the art form involves language and that it therefore necessarily contains linguistic representations of actions, feelings, and perceptions, etc. This stance depends on a particular view on language and literature that clearly has theoretical presuppositions. I shall here briefly sketch an alternative view. In his study *The Literary Mind*, cognitive linguist Mark Turner contends that literary cognition in fact precedes language. It should be noted that Turner uses “parable” more widely as the projection of one thing onto another (i.e., not only as a moral tale with two layers). In his thorough investigation, he “reverses the view that language is built up from the sober to the exotic; that out of syntactic phrase structures, one builds up language; that out of language one builds up narrative; that out of narrative, literary language is born as a special performance; and that out of literary narrative comes parable” (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 168. To explain the reversal, Turner argues: “With story, projection, and their powerful combination in parable, we have a cognitive basis from which language can originate. The dynamic processes of parable are basic to the construction of meaning and the construction of language. Story precedes grammar. Projection precedes grammar. Parable precedes grammar. Language follows from these mental capacities as a consequence; it is their complex product. Language is the child of the literary mind” (Ibid.). Thus, when literary language connects with the language of the reader, a bond is concomitantly established between the literary mind embedded in the work and the literary mind of the reader. Furthermore, since the literary mind is basically embodied, any given reading joins literary experience to experience in a wider sense (Ibid., 26–37; c.f. also Mark Johnson’s, *The Body in the Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). Engaging with Atwood’s novel necessitates profound engagement with the sense perceptions and impressions that come to givness there. Experience in this broader sense also provides bridges to other art forms.

11. A compressed diachronic summary of the most prominent interpretative directions on *Surfacing* can be found in Gina Wisker, *Margaret Atwood: An Introduction to Critical Views of Her Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 19–35.

12. Shannon Hengen, “Margaret Atwood and environmentalism” in *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, ed. Coral Ann Howells (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 72–85; Mycak, *In Search of the Split Subject*, 249–53; and Erinc Özdemir, “Power, Madness, and Gender Identity in Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing*: A Feminist Reading,” *English Studies: A Journal of English Language and Literature*; 84, no. 1 (2003): 57–79.

13. Coral Ann Howells, *Margaret Atwood* (Macmillan Modern Novelists. London: Macmillan, 1996), 20–32; and Kiley Kapuscinski, “Negotiating the Nation: The Reproduction and Reconstruction of the National Imaginary in Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing*,” *English Studies in Canada* 33, no. 3 (2007): 95–123.

14. Hengen, “Margaret Atwood and environmentalism”, 78–80; and Kapuscinski, “Negotiating the Nation”, 101.

15. Carol P. Christ, “Margaret Atwood: The Surfacing of Women’s Spiritual Quest and Vision”, *Signs* 2, no. 2 (1976): 316–30.

16. Nancy E. Bjerring, “The Problem of Language in Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing*”, *Queen’s Quarterly* 83, no. 4 (1976): 597–62; Meera T. Clark, “Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing*: Language, Logic and the Art of Fiction,” *Modern Language Studies* 13, no. 3 (1983): 3–15; and Walker Mendez, “Loon Voice”, 89–94.

17. For a concise discussion of *Surfacing* as quest (more precisely as the romance quest), see Mycak, 249–53. In the present study, the quest is seen more strictly in epistemological terms, that is, as an attempt at gaining knowledge by means of scientific or at least semi-scientific methods.

18. C.f. for instance Edmund Husserl’s description of immunence in which the person or “ego” is excluded. This is the sphere of seeing the seen, feeling the felt, etc.: “The ego as a person, as a thing belonging to the world, and experience as the experience of this person—even if entirely indeterminant—exist in the order of objective time: they are all transcendent and, as such, epistemologically null. Only through a reduction, which we shall call the phenomenological reduction, do I acquire an absolute givness that no longer offers anything transcendent” *The Idea of Phenomenology* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999), 34 (emphasis in the original). The protagonist in *Surfacing* moves towards such an immmanent sphere as the narrative progresses.

19. Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 10.

20. Ibid., 12.

21. Ibid., 20.

22. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “The Intertwining—The Chiasm”, in *The Visible and the Invisible*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 138.

23. Ibid., 136.

24. Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing* (New York: Anchor Books, 1998), 14.

25. A clear example of this dualism is the narrator’s explicit argumentation against the illusory separation of the head and the body: “The trouble is all in the knob at the top of our bodies” (Atwood, *Surfacing*, 75).
This could then be stretched out to exemplify reason–feeling, male–female, paternal–maternal, civilisation–nature, etc. Much Surfacing criticism would only differ in terms of how to understand the binary structure’s function. See for instance Mycak, In Search of the Split Subject, 249.

26. Atwood, Surfacing, 134.
27. Ibid., 21.
28. Ibid., 109.
29. Ibid., 106.
30. Ibid., 103–104.
31. Ibid., 98.
32. Ibid., 187.
33. Ibid., 50.
34. Ibid., 60.
35. I here follow Merleau-Ponty’s notion of primordial synaesthesia. The differentiation into separate senses is a construction. Literary language has the potential to intimate the secret region of the Flesh in which experience is synaesthetic; for instance, in terms of the tangible and the visible: “There is double and crossed situating of the visible in the tangible and of the tangible in the visible […]” (134). Therefore, Atwood’s poetic discourse does not necessarily construct an alien world but may instead connect with a more primordial experiential dimension.

36. Atwood, Surfacing, 36–37.
37. Hengen, “Margaret Atwood and environmentalism”, 79.
38. Atwood, Surfacing, 60.
39. Ibid., 36.
40. Ibid., 85.
41. Ibid., 86.
42. Ibid., 86.
43. Ibid., 12.
44. Ibid., 64.
45. Ibid., 173.
46. Walker-Mendez, Margaret Atwood: Reflection and Reality, 89.
47. Rancière, “Aesthetics as Politics”, 42.
48. Atwood, Surfacing, 90.
49. Ibid., 163.
50. Ibid., 181.
51. Ibid., 171.
52. As Heidegger claims: “[T]echnē is the name not only for the activities and skills of the craftsman, but also for the arts of the mind and the fine arts. Technē belongs to bringing-forth, to poēsis; it is something poietic” (13).

53. Atwood, Surfacing, 116, emphasis added.
54. Ibid., 185–86, emphasis added.
55. Ibid., 142.
56. Ibid.
57. Ibid.
58. Ibid., 143.
59. Ibid., 64.
60. Christ, “Margaret Atwood: The Surfacing of Women’s Spiritual Quest and Vision”, 322.
61. Atwood, Surfacing, 143.
62. Ibid., emphasis added.
63. Rancière, “Aesthetics as Politics”, 36.