

AESTHETICS OF ART ESSAY

Perhaps someone tells you “I don't know much about art, but I know what I like.” What role do you think knowledge about art plays in our appreciation of a work of art?

Nikolaos-Laonikos Psimikakis-Chalkokondylis

Full Name Nikolaos-Laonikos Psimikakis-Chalkokondylis
Course BMus (Composition) Year 4, Aesthetics of Art module
Essay Topic Perhaps someone tells you "*I don't know much about art, but I know what I like.*" What role do you think knowledge about art plays in our appreciation of a work of art?
Tutor Guy Dammann
Date 24 January 2011 (rev. 23 February 2013)
Word-count 2027 words (excluding title pages, bibliography)

“Interpretation is the revenge of the intellect upon art.”
(Sontag, 1961)

“Appreciation of works of art requires organized effort and systematic study. Art appreciation can no more be absorbed by aimless wandering in galleries than can surgery be learned by casual visits to a hospital.”
(Barnes, 1982)

The cultural/artistic vocabulary in which the artist conceives the work of art provides a context in which it is better understood if the vocabulary is shared with the viewer. An individual is already equipped, to some degree, with a rich vocabulary and cultural background in which she perceives and makes sense of art. This knowledge has been part of our (and others') culture and upbringing and is hard to detach ourselves from. How much can one appreciate African music without any knowledge on its background or context? Can an outsider to such a culture appreciate African music as much as someone who was born and raised in such a culture? At first it seems obvious that one needs to be versed in the *contextual* (and *contentual*) vocabulary of the work of art in order to better comprehend it. That is, one can enjoy the sensory experience of a traditional sub-saharan African musical/theatrical/dance performance, but it can definitely be said that they cannot fully comprehend the experience to the degree that people of that tradition do.

A (seemingly) contrasting example could be *bonseki* (rock-growing) – a Japanese art-form which espouses an aesthetics aiming in the creation of a work of art by interfering as little as possible with its natural tendencies; the *uncarved block* – do what would happen to it naturally, only to make it more natural. Can it be said, then, that one has a full appreciation of these works of art precisely when one knows nothing about their background? Or does one need to be versed in the Taoist and Zen Buddhist literatures and cultures from which these principles (and works of art) arise in order to fully comprehend the 'naturalness' and 'non-contrivence' that these works of art embody?

It is evident in the former (and not so evident in the latter) example that for a more complete appreciation of the experience of the work of art, it is necessary to have a certain degree of understanding of the background from which the works of art emerge. In order to comprehend literature, one needs to be familiar with the language, grammar and vocabulary in which it is written (even if the work of art in question deals away with rules of grammar, syntax, spelling) in order to be able to understand it (to put it in a meaningful context). Similarly, there is a great deal of *cultural* vocabulary which surrounds all works of art, which the experiencer must be familiar with in order to engage with them and extract some sort of meaningful experience from them.

It is also interesting to look into distinguishing between 'appreciation'¹ of a work of art and finding a work of art 'beautiful'. I believe they are related but not mutually dependent – one can appreciate something without finding it beautiful (e.g. appreciate the importance of Schaeffer's compositions for their contributions to the development of electronic music and the people it inspired without finding the musical compositions beautiful themselves) and one can find something beautiful without necessarily appreciating it fully (enjoying a sunset – one might be unaware of

¹ See Strangways (1927): *“To appreciate or appraise ought to mean to evaluate. [...] True appreciation is true criticism, and its business is to distinguish.”*

the macrocosmic details of the sunset, of the effects it has on weather, temperature, life, or why the sun changes colour when closer to the horizon, and still find it beautiful and emotionally engaging).

In experiencing a work of art there are two main aspects of experience: the **sensory** aspect (the aesthetic value, which depends on the experiencer of the work of art while experiencing it; an understanding *of* it) and the **cognitive** aspect (which depends on the context of creation and history of the work of art; an understanding *about* it), both of which respond to some degree to the content and form of the work of art in question. To a certain extent these two functions are mutually dependent, and to ordinary healthy individuals who possess a reasonable capacity for both, they perform distinct (but related) roles in our experiencing, understanding, and appreciation of works of art. However, a full appreciation of a work of art cannot occur without experiencing the work of art itself. A blind person can have someone describe to them a painting by Van Gogh – they can analyse it, explain the techniques used in painting it, describe the important features and details of this painting (even, perhaps, acquire a felt, engraved copy of the painting), learn about its historical and artistic importance, and what kind of emotions it evokes. Such a person can be said to have a certain kind of appreciation of that painting – but can they say they appreciate the painting as being 'beautiful'? It would be difficult (and perhaps disturbing) to accept that such a person could call the work of art in question 'beautiful' – to quote Robert Henri, “*Art appreciation, like love, cannot be done by proxy: it is a very personal affair and is necessary to each individual.*” (Henri, 1923)

To further demonstrate this point, paraphrasing John Searle and his *Chinese Room* (Searle, 1980), let us imagine there is a person in a room with a large manual containing all the potential questions he might receive regarding the nature of (or information about) a particular work of art, all of which have an associated answer. If anyone sends a question to this room, he can look it up and get back to them with the respective answer. Can we say that the person inside the room has an appreciation of the work of art in question?

It seems, therefore, that there is something about art appreciation that defies the 'objective' and lies within the 'subjective' realm of experience/knowledge (*objective* and *subjective* as described in Earle, 1972). Appreciation of art is not something 'out there' which we can simply assimilate by engaging with intellectually and acquiring an objective piece of knowledge or information about the work of art which is universal and available to everyone. Part of our appreciation of a work of art relies on our personal, subjective response to it, the sensory experience and the meaningful interaction an individual has with that work of art. One can appreciate the context of a work of art (the cognitive aspect of the experience, the *about*) but not the content of a work of art (the sensory aspect of the experience, the work of art *in itself*) and vice-versa. However, if any meaningful discussion about appreciation of a work of art is to take place, it is important to understand that although both aspects of our appreciation of a work of art are important, it is the aesthetic experience which has the principal function: if the aesthetic experience of a work of art was a kind of experience which could be communicated accurately by means other than the work of art itself, that work of art would have no reason to exist.

This is perhaps the reason why we are not faced with (so much) controversy when, instead, we are dealing with the statement “*I don't know much about nature, but I know what I find beautiful.*” An individual does not see a tree and asks “*Why was this tree created?*” or “*Why did it grow here?*” We do not presuppose reasons when faced with wonders of nature – which allows us to find things 'beautiful' without needing to defend or argue our position. There is no (mis)interpretation or (mis)understanding in appreciating the beauty one finds in a sunset. How could

someone possibly criticise or rate one's emotional response to a sunset?

Suppose, then, a work of art is found about which nothing is known: we don't know its age, geographical origin, the forms and shapes on it are not characteristic of any period or artist, it has no signature, and no language used to determine any background information on it. Can we appreciate this object fully? Or is 'appreciation' of a work of art a term relative to the maximum possible appreciation an individual could achieve of a certain work of art? That is to say, if the above information was declared impossible to retrieve, would our appreciation of said work of art be 'full', as long as no one else could possibly have a 'fuller' appreciation of it? Can we say we know everything, as long as no one else knows more than we do? In the imaginary artwork described above, can it be said that there is such a thing as an 'appreciation' of this work of art which no one is able to 'tap into' and see?

It is evident that non-knowledge about art is virtually impossible, and a certain context against which each individual experiences a work of art is inevitable. However, it has been demonstrated that regardless of how much one knows *about* a work of art, it is primarily the *aesthetic experience* of the work of art which allows us to appreciate a work of art fully. One must be careful, however, when investigating the cognitive experience of a work of art not to stray too far away from the aesthetic/sensory experience of it. An individual who knows many things *about* a work of art is a danger of 'missing the point' and experiencing the work of art not for what it *is*, but for what it *stands for*, what it *means*, the reasons/motivations/intents behind it, its impact on the larger artistic community and so on. It is imperative, therefore, that just like visual artists lose their childlike spontaneity upon learning the craft of painting, only to find it again after years of constant practice when they can finally be liberated from the constraints of technique, art critics must learn how to appreciate a work of art in its fullness, and then liberate themselves from the limitations that such an approach might impose and make themselves capable of experiencing a work of art for what it is, in the plain simplicity of its being. The difference being that the latter kind of spontaneity is a self-unconscious kind of spontaneity, as opposed to a naïve kind of spontaneity.

Finally, we return to Susan Sontag who claims that it is through our understanding of art as *mimesis* or *representation*, the idea that *form* is separated from *content*, that we have developed a need to explain or defend works of art – that we focus too much on content, we take it for granted, and try to unravel the underlying layers of meaning in order to 'understand' a work of art and experience it fully. If the aesthetic experience of a work of art could be communicated otherwise, the work of art would lose any artistic value it had, therefore it is the aesthetic experience of a work of art that should be at the forefront of any sort of appreciation of a work of art. Paraphrasing Alan Watts², and in line with Sontag's call for a new interpretation of art, one can claim that wonder should not be prevented from being the foundation of art appreciation. Knowledge about art is, of course, important in our appreciation of art, but the aesthetic experience of a work of art is *essential* and cannot be substituted by knowledge *about* the work of art.

2 See Watts (1973): “[The modern philosopher] has lost his sense of wonder. Wonder is, in modern philosophy, like something you mustn't have, like enthusiasm in 18th century England. In a very bad form. But you see, I don't know what question to ask when I wonder about the universe. It isn't a question that I am wondering about, it is a feeling that I have. Because I cannot formulate the question that is my wonder. [...] But that should not prevent wonder from being the foundation of philosophy.”

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barnes, Albert Coombes, as quoted in Garfield, Eugene. *The Legacy of Albert C. Barnes*. Essays of an Information Scientist (1982), p.391
- Earle, William. *The Autobiographical Consciousness*. Chicago: Quadrangle Books (1972), pp.18-33
- Henri, Robert. *The Art Spirit*. Basic Books (2007, first edition 1923), p.124
- Searle, John R. *Minds, Brains, and Programs*. The Behavioral and Brain Sciences Vol.3, CUP (1980)
- Sontag, Susan. *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux (1961)
- Strangways, A.H. Fox. *Appreciation*. Music & Letters, Vol. 8, No. 4. OUP (1927), p.396
- Watts, Alan. *The Relevance of Oriental Philosophy*. (1973) Transcribed by Charles Kluepfel, from a broadcast on WFMU in 2000.
<<http://mysite.verizon.net/vze1s8au/charlie/religion/watts.htm>> Accessed 23/02/13.