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Chosen Topic: Topic 4

“Art is not a copy of the real world. One of the damn things is enough.” Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (1976).

Feeling, Cognition, Art and Being

Introduction

If Martians came down to earth they would easily explain science, language and a lot of other human activities within the framework of Darwin’s theory of evolution. Yet, what I am sure they wouldn’t explain so easily is the existence of art. What possible evolutionary purpose could that serve? Why does art exist? What is the function of art?

Although philosophy asks these questions since the time of Plato and Aristotle, they haven’t arrived at any definite answer (like in many other philosophical questions, one might add). And although Art is older than both science and religion, as exemplified by the drawings of primitive mans in the caverns in southern France, the sufficient reason for its existence isn’t easy to come by (to put the question in a Leibnizian way). What is the value of art?

Still, philosophers have tried to give answers to these questions. Plato and Aristotle thought that art tries to represent reality in some sense while other philosophers inspired in hedonism thought that art’s value consists in giving pleasure. Another popular view is that art consists in the expression of our feelings. Nelson Goodman defends a different view. For Goodman art has a cognitive purpose, which is the construction of new worlds (world-making). Thus, Nelson Goodman has a constructionist view on Art.

First I will consider the traditional alternative of art as representation because it’s this view that Nelson Goodman is referring to in his quote and, secondly, because it is impossible to deal adequately with all the positions advanced in philosophy of art in such a small essay. Then, I will expose and evaluate Goodman’s thesis and conclude that it doesn’t fare any better than its main rival, which I will dub, the representative theory of art. Finally I will expose my own view on the subject inspired by two great philosophers from two supposedly opposite traditions (although, as Richard Rorty and others have pointed out, these particular philosophers have a number of striking similarities), namely, Martin Heidegger and Ludwig Wittgenstein.

First Part: Art as *mimesis*

Plato conceived of art as *mimesis*. Greek sculptors and painters tried to capture, mimic or imitate reality to the best of their abilities in their work. When making a sculpture or a portrait of a person, the work’s quality was proportional to the level of resemblance with reality. In fact, to be precise, for Plato the artist didn’t tried to make a representation of reality but a representation of a representation of reality. Since the only true reality are perfect, ethereal, ever-lasting Ideas and Forms. That is one of the reasons why Plato had such a poor view of artists, instead of contemplating the one true reality (the realm of Ideas), they limited themselves to imitate an imitation, in this case, sensible reality.

Plato's philosophy of art does seem to be adequate if we consider the case of activities like sculpting and painting, at the state they were developed in his time. But what about music? What about more abstract forms of art, like Kandinsky's abstractionism? What about impressionism? What about René Magritte surrealism? Escher's impossible pictures?

A conceptual investigation on the nature of representation can show us, I believe, that music can't represent (not like a picture at least). A picture can represent another thing by similarity. But what is the similarity between the picture of a book and a book? The picture is two dimensional, while the book is tridimensional. It is possible to read from the book, but it is ludicrous to suppose you can read from the representation of the book. So, the assumption that the work of art should share all the properties with what it should represent isn't tenable, because there are a great number of properties that can't be shared between works of art and reality.

Plato could reply that similarity isn't identity, after all he didn't defend that a work of art should be identical to a thing in reality, just similar in the sense it shares all the relevant properties (it is widely accepted that similarity can be defined as qualitative identity or identity between instanced properties). But my point is precisely that Plato didn't elucidate which are the relevant properties.

Be as it may, two identical copies of the same book aren't representations of each other, so similarity can't be a sufficient condition for pictorial representation. But it is at least a necessary condition of pictorial representation, I believe. If I draw an exact picture of Mr. A in terms of color, perceived shape and so on, I am representing, if it is considered that I am representing at all, Mr. A, not Mr. B (and if I am trying to make a portrait of Mr. B it is more intuitive to say that I failed in making a portrait).

But Beethoven's Seven Symphony isn't similar to anything and so it can't represent. Neither are some of Escher's pictures, in fact, the whole objective of Escher in making those pictures is that they can't, because of their very nature, be anything like in reality (because they are built in such way that they are paradoxical if understood in three dimensional space).

But what about language, one may think? There is no similarity between a word or a sentence and a state of affairs. The problem is that in language there are established, acknowledged, shared conventions that determine what written or spoken signs stand for. And there isn't such thing for music.

In spite of this, Suzanne Langer tried to develop a theory in her book *Philosophy in a New Key*, inspired by Wittgenstein's distinction between saying and showing in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, which is based on the premise that art represents in a way very similar to that of language.

Wittgenstein had said based on Russell's theory of descriptions that the apparent form of a sentence is not its real one. The real form of a sentence is not its grammatical form but its logical form, expressed with Frege's predicate calculus, which could only be shown but not said. For Wittgenstein builds his theory of meaning trying to rehabilitate the idea that language represents as a picture does, that is why his theory is often named the picture theory of meaning.

The same way a picture represents reality by sharing its form with what is represented, language represents reality by sharing its logical form with it. This is expressed by the proposition number three in the *Tractatus*, namely, "The logical picture of facts is a thought". And exactly like a picture

can't represent how it represents (depict its own depiction, so to speak), language can't represent how it represents either. This is why, for Wittgenstein, we can't say what the logical form of a sentence is but only show it through logical analysis.

Langer will use Wittgenstein theory and make another distinction, this time between forms of presentation and symbolic forms. An argument is made after two structures, one logical and another linguistic. An argument may be valid, cogent, or solid and yet be badly written, or on the other hand, an argument may be stated with elegance and eloquence but be invalid and have false premises. The point is that when an argument is presented to us we don't see the two separated structures, the logical and the grammatical, but only one unified, *gestalt*-like structure. That unified structure is something that can only be said but not showed.

This is Langer's view on works of art. They are forms of presentation whose meaning can't be said but only showed, more particularly, they are forms of presentation of our feelings. Indeed, it could be said that for Langer works of art are the logical form of our feelings. That is why it is so hard to say what a music is about to persons who can't understand it when they hear it (I am speaking of instrumental music without lyrics, of course).

The big problem is that Wittgenstein's theory on whose Langer's work is based is flawed, as Wittgenstein himself noted. Language shouldn't be understood as a unified descriptive structure, but as a variety of different language games. Nor is there any hidden logical form that can only be shown through logical analysis, like the Marxist Piero Sraffa asked the earlier Wittgenstein: "What is the logical structure of a gesture?" With this in mind the foundation of Langer's theory (the idea of a logical form and the distinction between saying and showing) is refuted by the criticisms the second Wittgenstein made to his earlier philosophy.

What the later Wittgenstein understood, and the earlier Wittgenstein ignored, is that disentangling the knots of our conceptual scheme requires subtlety not logical calculus – *l'esprit de finesse* not *l'esprit de geometrie*.

Second Part: Art as World-Making

Against the view of art as *mimesis*, Nelson Goodman proposes a view of art as world-making. Goodman's philosophy of art is based on his constructionist metaphysics due to the fact that he believes that there is no single right way of describing the world like metaphysical realists believe. The idea that reality is out there and our job is to find it, is one which is opposed by Goodman. The mathematician, the scientist and the artist are all inventors not discoverers on this conception.

This is a very interesting conception which puts side by side science and art as having a cognitive function. Science has the cognitive function of allowing us to find different and alternative ways of speaking about the nature of space and time in physics, the nature of life in biology and the nature of mind in psychology. But what is the cognitive function of art, one could ask? What is the value of the world artists create?

Goodman's answer to this question is that artists create a world where we learn to experience better our feelings. The real value of art isn't giving us conceptual knowledge but in improving our capacities of feeling and experiencing things. Using Gilbert Ryle's famous distinction we could say that we learn a know-how not a know-that. I am told by a great number of people that they usually listen to sad movies when they feel depressed and this is certainly, *prima facie*, one argument for

Goodman's theory. He could easily explain this fact by saying that depressed people go to sad movies because that I are learning how to cope with sadness and how to deal with it.

This conception could be interestingly connected to one of the questions I posed at the beginning of this essay, namely "What is the evolutionary advantage of art?" . From Goodman's perspective this is easy to answer, the evolutionary function of art is to help us to cope and deal with our feelings better. Obviously, there is an evolutionary advantage in knowing how to experience and deal with our feelings of anger, sadness, frustration, euphoria and even love better.

This is Goodman's perspective, on which scientists like Einstein, Darwin and Freud and artists like Schonberg, Escher and Reiner Maria Rilke, walk hand in hand constructing new worlds in order to gain a new understanding of ourselves and what surrounds us.

But there are a couple of difficulties with this position stemming from this constructionist position. The first one is that science doesn't give us alternative right descriptions of reality and the scientist's job is to describe not to invent .Indeed the scientist's theory is his invention but not what the theory is about. Thus, the job of the scientist isn't to build new worlds but to understand this one.

I would say the same thing about the artist, the function of art isn't to build a new world where we learn how to better experience things. The value of art isn't in improving our capacity to experience feelings but in giving us experiential knowledge. Although I wholeheartedly agree with Goodman's criticism of the idea that art ought to give us conceptual knowledge, I can't agree with his position that art gives practical knowledge since I think there is a third and better alternative. What we gain when we go see a movie, when we see Magritte *Le trahison de las images* or Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* isn't practical knowledge regarding feelings but what we could call experiential knowledge. When one loses someone dear, when one falls in love with someone or when one contemplates the majesty and grandiosity of the Egyptian pyramids, what one gains isn't practical knowledge but experiential knowledge, a more primordial knowledge of how something feels .This thesis needs further clarification, since not "feeling" but "being" is the right concept, which I will provide in the next section.

Third Part: Towards a Heideggarian and Wittgensteinian view of art

Both Heidegger on *Sein und Zeit* and Wittgenstein on the *Philosophical Investigations* try to overcome the philosophical tradition that began with Plato and continued with Descartes. Since explaining the philosophy of these philosophers would probably require a book of its own, a brief sketch of the relevant parts of their respective philosophies will have to suffice.

From Wittgenstein's philosophy I will use his criticism of the Platonic and Socratic tradition that searches for essences in things. Socrates asked "What is knowledge?", "What is justice", "What is courage?" .And Wittgenstein answers that believing that for every noun there should be something corresponding to it is a grammatical illusion or a mistake we make in virtue of the nature of our language. There is nothing is common between everything we call language, only language games (Wittgenstein uses this expression because there is nothing in common to all the games and only to them).

Similarly, there is nothing in common between different forms of art, only family-resemblances. If we follow Wittgenstein's advice and imagine several family members, such as a father, a mother, a son, a daughter, and we realize that it isn't necessary that there is something in common between all members. The father may have something in common with the son, the daughter with the mother and the children among themselves, but there needn't be any universal trait. Most of our more important and fundamental concepts are like that and I believe that art is just a family resemblance concept which has an interesting and good consequence, namely, the field of artistic creativity can't be narrowed because it doesn't fit pre-established criteria. If Plato or Goodman were right then it would be possible to reject Kandinsky's paintings as art because they don't represent anything or reject René Magritte paintings because there is not any feeling in any obvious sense that his work help us to cope with better. To believe that art has an essence is to kill art.

From Heidegger's philosophy in *Being and Time* and *The Origin of the Work of Art*, I will draw on the following aspects. First, it is necessary to say that Heidegger considers the question of Being (*Sein*) the fundamental question and when trying to answer it he will investigate the being who asks this question, such as ourselves, which he calls *Dasein*. He will investigate this being by what he calls an Analytic of *Dasein*, which is the project of spelling out the necessary structure with which *Dasein* interprets and experiences things. One of his famous conclusions is that *Dasein* is neither the contemplating platonic subject nor the isolated subject who doubts the existence of external objects of Descartes, but Being-in-the-world (*In-Der-Welt-Sein*). Heidegger describes many more necessary and primordial characteristics of *Dasein*, namely that he is being-with (*Mitsein*), being-towards, being-towards-death and so on. It be impossible to explain all of Heidegger's investigations and that is why I am going to speak primarily about his thought on the connection between truth and being which is relevant to my thesis.

I said earlier in this essay that I thought the value of art was on providing something called experiential knowledge and now I will clarify this thesis based on Heidegger's work. For Heidegger, *Dasein* always interprets himself in some way and is therefore always in some understanding of Being. In one of his works he even says that, for example, the oriental and occidental ways of being are very different, or that Being shows himself differently for eastern and western cultures. The main idea is that we reveal our own understanding of being through our practices, habits, or to put in a Wittgensteinian style, different forms of life. And this activity of disclosedness and unconcealing of Being is, for Heidegger, what truth is. The primary locus of truth isn't the judgment, like Heidegger says in the paragraph 44 of *Being and Time*, but in our interpretative everyday practices. Truth is *aletheia*.

My conclusion is that art is a way of interpreting our way of being, of making sense of our understanding being. Depressed people go to sad movies because they are trying to interpret their own sadness, not because they want to gain some kind of practical skill on how to feel sad, like Goodman argues. But art way of disclosing the nature of being can't be given a definition, because truth or the disclosing of being is something more primordial than language. The best we can do is describe several art-games (making an analogy with Wittgenstein's language games).