

Essay on the Concept of Art and Reality

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Art shows something of reality as a whole, a reality that exists above or below the directly perceptible world. There is a first reality, or empirical reality, which can be mapped and captured through sense perception and is characterized by immediacy; and then there is a second or imagined reality that unfolds beyond direct empirical and experiential observation. While the animal intellect is attracted to the surface, to mere appearances, the human intellect is drawn to what lies beyond the surface. The ability to imagine is a condition of human intellect, being characterized, in Schopenhauer's terms, by a power of "seeing in things not what nature has actually formed but what she endeavored to form, yet did not bring about" (Schopenhauer, 1969, pp. 186-187). For Schopenhauer, this capacity can be fully engaged not by the "ordinary man, that manufactured article of nature" (ibid., p. 187), but by the man of genius. In contrast, John Ruskin holds that the power of art consists precisely in allowing us to regain what can be called the innocence of the eye, in other words, a kind of childlike perception which remains blind to the meaning of perceived things. (Ruskin, 2006, p. 42) This paper seeks a possible answer to the question of how art ties us to reality. | Keywords: *Philosophy of Art, German Idealism, Iconology, Interpretation of Art, 'Internal Erlebnis'*

1. Introduction

1.1. Direct and imagined reality

His contemporaries and rivals were Timanthes, Androeydes, Eupompus and Parrhasius. This last, it is recorded, entered into a competition with Zeuxis, who produced a picture of grapes so successfully represented that birds flew up to the stage-buildings; whereupon Parrhasius himself produced such a realistic picture of a curtain that Zeuxis, proud of the verdict of the birds, requested that the curtain should now be drawn and the picture displayed; and when he realized his mistake, with a modesty that did him honour he yielded up the prize, saying that whereas he had deceived birds Parrhasius had deceived him, an artist. It is said that Zeuxis also subsequently painted a Child Carrying Grapes, and when birds flew to the fruit with the same frankness as before he strode up to the picture in anger with it and said, I have painted the grapes better than the child, as if I had made a success of that as well,

the birds would inevitably have been afraid of it. (Plinius, 1949, 35.36)

This passage is about an illusionistic picture made by Zeuxis, which allures the birds because it looks so real. It illustrates the question of depiction as illusion of direct reality. The ordinary viewer might expect that visual arts represent direct reality, what is more: a more and more accurate copy of reality (it does not matter that everything that exists in nature is more 'realistic' than the content provided by a picture). Yet, according to Gadamer, both nature and art appeal to us.

Naturally the significance of art also depends on the fact that it speaks to us, that it confronts man with himself in his morally determined existence. But the products of art exist only in order to address us in this way – natural objects, however, do not exist to address us in this way. This is the significant interest of the naturally beautiful: that it is still able to present man with himself in respect to his morally determined existence. (Gadamer, 1989, p. 45)

In works of art, artistic beauty is only there to address what precisely defines the function and purpose of the works of art (Hegel calls it exploration or unveiling of truth).

Against this we must maintain that art's vocation is to unveil the *truth* in the form of sensuous artistic configuration, to set forth the reconciled opposition just mentioned, and so to have its end and aim in itself, in this very setting forth and unveiling. (Hegel, 1975, p. 55)

But natural beauty is significantly and fundamentally of another order. Natural beauty is not art's vocation, if there is any vocation at all. I am only referring to the difference between natural and artistic beauty and to the problems of mixing them, and we can think here of Kant's well-known example of imitating a nightingale's song:

And yet in this case we probably confuse our participation in the cheerfulness of a favorite little animal with the beauty of its song, for when bird song is imitated very precisely by a human being (as is sometimes done with the nightingale's warble) it strikes our ear as quite tasteless. (Kant, 1987, p. 94)

The significance of the so-called direct reality (nature) is undeniable and essential, while the higher level of reality is built upon it. At the same time, that direct reality seems to be real is a matter of common sense. External experience sees it as true. More precisely, the external experience sees this as true and does not know about higher order realities. If you have no direct experience of something, if directness is lacking, one may take it does not exist at all. Schopenhauer's introductory sentence in *The World as Will and Representation* reads as follows: "the world is my representation" (*Die Welt ist meine Vorstellung*). (Schopenhauer, 1969, p. 3) Which certainly means two things: on the one hand, all that appears to me is the world. I see the door, my boots, my dog, and much more: the world is thus because it appears so and so to me. On the other hand, everything qualifies as a world insofar as it appears to me. The first reading is intelligible to everyone: what I see, feel or experience truly exists. The second reading says that everything can exist only if it exists directly for me. Accordingly, the 'misconception' related to the

‘objectivity’ of the world can be safely discarded. The objectivity of the world means that it perdures even when I do not experience it. On the other hand, when I imagine what the world would be after my death, it is an image of my own. The deepest basis of *objectivity* is faith and certainty (with respect to the existence of the world) lays in *subjectivity*.

Let us remember that everyday thinking mistakenly relies on the material reality that appears to the senses. One example is the fact that in 1986, many people did not believe that there was radiation caused by the nuclear accident because they ‘did not feel’, ‘did not see’ the rays coming. Let us take another example of popular thinking: the profound belief in this world is expressed by the saying: what I can eat exists. Today’s materialistic based vision of the world is based on a most strong faith in matter. If we think it over, we can conclude that materialism has become a common religion today. Hegel points to this idea when he writes about the appearance (*Schein*) and deception (*Täuschung*) of this ‘bad and transitory world’:

Art liberates the true content of phenomena from the pure appearance and deception of this bad, transitory world, and gives them a higher actuality, born of the spirit. (Hegel, 1975, p. 9)

In Hegel’s view, art unveils truth and provides a higher and spiritual reality. Appearance (*Schein*) and phenomenon (*Erscheinung*) cover more precisely the immediacy of what is tangible, of what one experiences, sees, hears, touches, or, in one word, perceives. The real, the superior and spiritual reality, so the true reality is above it all; and it is not tangible, nor tactile nor perceptible. In brief: spiritual reality is the only intelligible reality. And, according to Hegel, it is conveyed through art. Ordinary thinking, of course, accepts as real whatever is perceptible through the senses. But in Hegel’s view, true reality is a spiritual reality which cannot be grasped, tasted or smelled through material senses.

For the materialist, it is difficult to understand what Hegel is hinting at. Nor is it surprising. Just like philosophy, art is not a mass sport, not even a social entertainment. As Heraclitus warns though, Word (Logos) is true evermore, yet men are unable to understand it (DK B1). “This world, which is the same for all, no one of gods or men has made. But it always was, is, and will be an ever-living Fire, with measures of it kindling, and measures going out” (κόσμον τόνδε, τὸν αὐτὸν ἀπάντων, οὔτε τις θεῶν οὔτε ἀνθρώπων ἐποίησεν, ἀλλ’ ἦν αἰεὶ καὶ ἔστιν καὶ ἔσται πῦρ ἀείζωνον, ἀπτόμενον μέτρα καὶ ἀποσβεννύμενον μέτρα) (DK B30).

Fire or home stove is not simply fire or flame. It refers instead to the coziness of the cosmos, where man is man because he lives near the gods (ἦθος ἀνθρώπων δαίμων) (DK B119). As mythology shows it, man’s place (ἦθος) is near the gods (δαίμων).

1.2. Imagined reality

The curtain of Parrhasius is that which is always beyond directness. More precisely, it is what comes to us through mediation. That which doesn’t seem real to us at first sight. Or what seems real at a first glance (the curtain) but

acquires its meaning only in context. In other words, what is intangible, not palpable, what cannot be tasted; what can only be understood through interpretation. The curtain refers to the world of the imagination where direct experience cannot be valid, which is precisely the opposite of external experience.

Here's another quote from Hegel: "The beauty of art is beauty born of the spirit and born again." (Hegel, 1973, p. 2) As we have seen, Hegel distinguishes between material and spiritual senses, but only between them, whereby the material refers to touch, smell and taste, while the spiritual refers to sight and hearing. But Hegel is not talking about the possibility of inner experience. He speaks of the interior, of course, although not in the sense of emotional passions. Passions, although of no interest to Hegel, can play a role, along with reason, in the possibility of spiritual processing.

To be clear: there is the image, with its colors, shapes, forms, etc. (which fall within sense reality), but there are also the emotions it arises, or the passionate rejection, accompanied by thinking or by spiritual gain in the Hegelian sense (imagined reality). The latter is also a step forward, towards his "transcendence of the sensuous", which Hegel himself considered so important in his *Aesthetics*:

Art liberates the true content of phenomena from the pure appearance and deception of this bad, transitory world, and gives them a higher actuality, born of the spirit. Thus, far from being mere pure appearance, a higher reality and truer existence is to be ascribed to the phenomena of art in comparison with [those of] ordinary reality. (Hegel, 1975, p. 9)

However, according to Hegel, emotional states like pleasure, disgust, anger; joy etc. that might affect the observer don't play any role in transcending the sensuous.

According to Erwin Panofsky, iconology does something similar. In fact, iconology itself is nothing more than iconography brought to the level of spiritual perception. It is very similar to Hegel, but at the same there are significant differences. Panofsky says that iconography refers to a description of a work of art, whereas iconology, to its interpretation. (Panofsky, 1955, p. 26-54)

However, I have always felt, perhaps mistakenly, that his theory is very strongly tied to historicity and that, while it opens the way for a symbolic and allegorical approach of contents, it obscures affective experience or the philosophical dialogue we engage with the image, on the image (and of course with ourselves). It is as if Hegel, Gadamer, and Panofsky needed to be kneaded somehow, added a little Simmel, shaken well and preserved somewhat. Here is what I mean by that. The 'pictorial turn' (in other words, the increase in the role played by the image (Mitchell, 1994, pp. 11-35); "*ikonische Wendung*" (Boehm, 1994, pp. 11-38)) laid emphasis on the iconic cult that prevails in our world which states that the pictorial representation reigns above everything else. But the classics of this theory are quite uncertain as to

when the pictorial turn started. If there really is a visual turnaround, then interdisciplinarity is needed, Mitchell says. As if he were 'really' insecure. And for good reason. It is enough to just look at children who no longer take cubes in their hands, no longer build sandcastles, but use the cubes appearing on a tablet and build virtual castles out of them. The presence of the power of the ability to handle intelligent devices is undeniable. Nowadays, teaching of handwriting is considered by an increasing number of people to be meaningless, because one must be able to type, instead of writing. Those who defend this point of view forget that cognitive skills are developed by using hands (through manual activities). Combined with the activity of the mind, manual activity brings cognitive skills to a level where creativity may emerge.

Seeing the PC or tablet monitor is not looking at a 'picture'. Of course, there are different kinds of pictures. A distinction should be made between simple and complex images. Let us see what differentiates them.

2. The philosophy of images

2.1. Simple images.

Bound to the material world, a simple image does not convey any inner content that would be moved out of immediacy by intellectual or emotional activity. It merely explains and analyses what is otherwise tangible. Such is a priority table. Or Heidegger's signpost ("adjustable red arrow") in *Sein und Zeit*. (Heidegger, 1996, p. 73) A simple image is to be experienced passively; it does not require active perception. Rather, it expects people should follow what everyone is used to be following.

This kind of image belongs to the first reality. It is presumably what Belting calls "visually appearing" (Belting, 2005, p. 2) and being confused with an 'image'. Or, I would say, confusing the simple image with the complex image, since the visual that appears should also be called an image. Maybe it is the way Belting means it. The simple image depicts direct reality.

2.2. The complex image

On the other hand, the complex image conveys different contents. It is given in imagined reality. It is not simply meant to be perceived passively, but calls for common thinking, for joint and passionate conversation, as well as for further intersubjective thinking. Such is the striking angel in the portico in some images of the Annunciation (*Angelic Greeting*). The complex image goes beyond immediacy and tangible materiality. It requires active engagement: to act a certain way, to change yourself by emotionally charged thinking, to ask and doubt, to be transformed by it into an independent and autonomous individual. The image is not just an image: it contains spirit and passion. According to Aby Warburg, through a passion formula (Pathosformeln), "an emotionally charged visual trope", images express universality, namely in the traditional appearance of memory (Warburg, 2003, pp. 104-5).

The complex image may even refer to what Belting calls the “authentic image” (*Das Echte Bild*), where “*echt*” means both ‘authentic’ and ‘real’ or ‘true’. (Belting, 2005, 1. *Das echte Bild und die Medienfrage*), which he associates with the concept of truth. But it just says nothing about what truth is. I have dealt in detail elsewhere with the possible interpretation of ‘truth’ in relation to the meaning of ‘destiny’ on the basis of the myth of Er by Plato. (Plato 1970, Book X. *The Myth of Er*). Belting, on the other hand, says we expect the ‘authentic image’ to return reality as it is. But how to distinguish between them? The approach of Nicolaus Cusanus might be more illuminating than Belting’s. According to Cusanus, there are two kinds of vision. The first refers to individual objects, while the second is the abstract vision (*visus abstractus*), also considered the essential vision (*visus essentialis*). (Cusanus, 1985) Essential vision means seeing the essence.

The question still remains: what is reality or what is reality like? What is it like for you or me, for the others, given that we see it and appreciate it in so many different ways? This problem is addressed in the third part of Gorgias’s “famous triple movement” (*trilemma*) (DK.VII.65.) Gorgias’s first theorem states that the world does not exist. The second theorem states that even if existence exists, it cannot be known. According to the third theorem, even if it can be known, it cannot be communicated because numerous ways of understanding take the meaning so far that it can only be returned by the concept of ‘misunderstanding’.

Thus, postulating the existence of an authentic image will not yield too many results. Belting is right, an authentic image is self-contradictory: as it replaces something, we consider it real. See (Belting, 2005, Chapter 1)

Let us just think of Gombrich, who rightly draws attention to the great number of people who, from Leonardo to Géricault, have already tried to paint the figure of a galloping horse as accurately as possible. Manet portrayed horses from the front in *The Race at Longchamp* (1866), in a completely different way than painters used before to paint a galloping horse (Gombrich, 1951, pp. 387-388). Ernest Meissonier (1815-1891), the most celebrated and highest-paying painter of his age and a contemporary painter of Manet, was able to create a perfect illusion of a winter landscape at the Grande Maison, by using flour to simulate snow. The idea had to be dropped because the flour was attracting rats. Neither his money nor his imagination had limits. When he made *Friedland, 1807* (1861-1875) for his masterpiece, he hired a special team to study the galloping horses. (Friedland was one of the Napoleon’s greatest victory in 1807, when, defeating the Russian army, he enforced peace from Tsar Alexander I).

What is truth? What is reality? What is authentic? There is no clear answer to that.

According to Erwin Panofsky, everything is connected to everything, and this is not always a good thing. It is true for his life. Panofsky as a Jewish descent fled the Nazis, Warburg also left Germany even earlier (though not long ago), yet the two thinkers represent two different eras of art. The Warburg Library was in

Hamburg until Nazi power, then it was evacuated from Hamburg to London. The former director of the Warburg Library was Fritz Saxl, who had also been a significant inspiration for Panofsky, which can be recognized through his works. Panofsky himself emigrated to the States in 1933.

Erwin Panofsky became famous mainly for his development of the ‘iconological method’ mentioned several times in his essays. Let’s look at this briefly. There are three levels in Panofsky’s theory:

Primary or natural subject matter	Pre-iconographical description
Secondary or conventional subject matter	Iconographical analysis
Intrinsic or intrinsic meaning or content	Iconographical interpretation

(Panofsky, 1959, p. 14)

The theory starts with a pre-iconographical level, then it deals with iconographic analysis, and finally, it reaches an iconological level. To my mind, these levels could be divided differently: the third level would be closest to what I myself outline.

My own division into levels of processing of the work of art is based on Panofsky’s theory (but I am also drawing on Hegel and Gadamer).

3. From external experience to inner ‘Erlebnis’

I argue that there are three levels of processing a work of art:

3.1. External experience → in relation to a simple image that is given in direct reality.

3.2. Understanding → moving from a simple image to a complex image in imagined reality.

3.3. Inner Erlebnis (experiencing understanding) → a complex image given in imagined reality.

3.1. External experience

The first level, or external experience, can be related to the pre-iconographical elements. One sees / hears the work of art, one perceives the form, one has a basic understanding of the main actions etc. But this type of understanding is very coarse. For instance, for an Eskimo who has never heard anything about Jesus Christ, Leonardo da Vinci’s *Last Supper* just represents an evening meal

with a feasting group of people. This is also the second level for Panofsky. Contrary to Panofsky, I think most museum visitors remain, to this day, at this level, but at least they go and see an exhibition, listen to an opera, watch a theatre play or a movie etc.

3.2. Understanding

Understanding comes into play when the recipient confronts the work of art with a cultural environment, when he or she interprets historical, artistic, or technical contexts. When he or she knows what happens in a work of art or what is the message conveyed by a work, and why. The recipient, at this stage, can place a given work in time, in a context of style. He or she understands meaning, or at least guesses secondary communication, he or she is able to interpret, compare, sort, and last but not least: appreciate. Let us go on with the example of the *Last Supper*: knowing the rules of perspective, the museum visitor knows what the scene is about, the significance of wine and bread, he or she understands the symbolic meaning. The visitor may have heard of Alberti's famous book *On Painting* or possibly about Ficino. Therefore, the visitor is able to compare, distinguish and evaluate, thanks to his background knowledge. He or she may be going to opera, be especially passionate about the Wagner's music, know lots of stories about him; he or she may be watching the most watched theatres performances or read the most important interpretations of them. If they are not professionals, nor art or music historians, they may still be eager to know a lot of details regarding a particular period or style to which a work belongs. Exhibition organizers, art directors and conductors tend to bear in mind this kind of 'perfect visitor'.

3.3. Internal *Erlebnis* (experience)

More precisely: the experience and understanding internalized (*Erlebnis*). It means more than iconology (Panofsky), more than the history of cultural phenomena and symbols (Cassirer; Panofsky, 1959, p. 8), but it is nothing more than what exists in artistic expertise, it cannot do without it, but it goes beyond it. It is an art-philosophical understanding and an internalized experience. Notions such as *Erlebnis* (experience) (Georg Simmel) and understanding (Hegel) are important here. With respect to *Erlebnis*, Gadamer, for instance, points out that

An aesthetic *Erlebnis* always contains the experience of an infinite whole. Precisely because it does not combine with other experiences to make one open experiential flow, but immediately represents the whole, its significance is infinite. (Gadamer, 1989, p. 61)

What is more, the work itself may be urged to speak (at a hermeneutic level), hinting in a peculiar way at self-understanding. (Gadamer, 1989, p. XX) However, I think the three notions (*Erlebnis*, understanding and dialogue) are somehow present at the same time. *Erlebnis* is what a work of art offers, whatever that may be. The experience, which helps to understand, to recognize

the image while at the same time it carries on, captivates the spectator, and in the whole process, it invites to dialogue, offers interpretation, demands interpretation, argues, accuses, defends, shifts away, alienates, and then attracts. This process is present at the same time in the physical realm and in the mental context. It does not leave alone, it constantly engages, then suddenly releases, liberates, but only to make us soon feel again the tension and the dynamism. This is the task of philosophy of art.

4. Conclusion

A dialogue is needed with and for the work. When this dialogue is initiated, it gives rise to interpretation, then to another thought, then perturbs the feelings again. And so on. This may go beyond the second level (of understanding) but without ignoring it. Every stage can only be left behind if you have already reached it. The three levels are built on the top of each other, one does not exist or can exist without the other. The third only includes the first two. Internal experience (Erlebnis) can only arise if we go beyond external experience and understanding.

To be clear: we first need to look at the picture, listen to the music etc.; then to understand the message (at a hermeneutical level), in a specific cultural context and enjoy the serenity and or pain expressed by the work of art. Finally, this understanding is perceived as experience; the experience (Erlebnis) hidden in understanding makes itself felt. Contrary to popular belief, the two are not mutually exclusive but mutually reinforcing.

More precisely or more intelligibly, there are three stages: the ordinary understanding, the interpretation of art history, and philosophy of art. The third is often forgotten. However, getting further through these stages is getting closer to the work of art itself.

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