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# **Aesthetic and Artistic Autonomy**

Edited by  
Owen Hulatt

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# Aesthetic and Artistic Autonomy

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## Preface

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In assembling this collection I was very fortunate to have the encouragement and advice of Peter Lamarque, who supported this project from the beginning with his characteristic generosity of spirit. I would like to thank him for his advice and time, which were invaluable. I would also like to thank James Clarke for his help and guidance in negotiating the difficulties which editing a collection always generates. Both Peter Lamarque and Filippo Contesi looked over earlier drafts of the introduction, and what clarity it has is at least partially owing to them. The flaws, of course, remain my own. I also thank Max Paddison for commenting on an earlier draft of my chapter. I am grateful for the assistance of the staff at Continuum, in particular Rachel Eisenhauer and Colleen Coalter, without whose forbearance this book would not have been produced.

Finally, my wife Lauren has supported me in more ways than I can name, and with more patience and love than I can convey. I remain happily in her debt.

Owen Hualé  
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# Introduction

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The history of the study of art, like the history of art itself, has been a history of the emergence of implicit problems. This volume examines two central problems which have emerged in this history: that of aesthetic autonomy and that of artistic autonomy. In the second half of this introduction I will give a brief overview of the essential structure of the philosophical debate. First, however, it is helpful to trace the history behind the consideration of aesthetic and artistic autonomy.

The history of the philosophy of art is simultaneously a history of the practice of art itself. As is well known, art as a fully autonomous practice, free of subservience to extra-artistic social functions, is a relatively late development. The extrication of art from cultic, religious and state functions was a fitful, uneven process and the theory of art, itself an exploration of this gradually emerging practice, was similarly late in coming to a full self-consciousness of art's apparent capacity to bear intrinsic value divorced from social function.

The eighteenth century represents the period in which aesthetics and the philosophy of art, as we presently understand these disciplines, emerged. The emergence of these disciplines may best be understood as the emergence of two questions, both of which served to delineate and open entirely fresh philosophical space. The emergence of aesthetics, in the modern sense, was coeval with the emergence of the question of the constitution of aesthetic judgements; should judgements of aesthetic quality be understood as purely autonomous (predicated only on the quality and organization of 'aesthetic properties'), or intermixed with heteronomous non-aesthetic properties and standards? The emergence of the philosophy of art, in the modern sense, was coeval with the emergence of the question of the constitution of artistic practice; can decisions made by artists be understood as driven solely by autonomous aesthetic choices, or is artistic practice determined by extra-aesthetic standards and concerns?

Prior to this point, the philosophical appreciation of art rested on two relatively uncontested assumptions. The first of these was the heteronomy of aesthetic judgements. As may be seen as late as medieval aesthetics, the reception of an artwork, the judgement of its *value*, was predicated on the judgement of the artwork's fitness to perform a given *function*. These functions varied by period and by culture, being most often the representation of, or education towards, state or religious values. And so, although the question had yet to be posed, there was in essence an implicit commitment to the *heteronomy* of aesthetic judgements. Artworks were simply bound up with and expressive of other structures of value; the modern idea that artworks might come to inhabit a structure of *sui generis* value was scarcely in play at this point.

Similarly, the theory of the practice and status of the artist had yet to fully emerge in the familiar shape of modern discussion. As one might expect, given that art is essentially a form of making which has only recently in modernity become disentangled from extrinsic functions, artists, and the nature of artistic practice, were perennially understood on the model of the craftsman. (The very earliest accounts of artistic practice we have, as, for example, in Plato's *Republic* and the Torah, reflect this just as do the very late pre-modern accounts given in medieval aesthetics). Like other craftsmen, artists were held to have extrinsic goals which they were required to fulfil (be that moral instruction or giving praise to the glory of God, or whatever). While these goals were assuredly extrinsic and not up for debate, the artist was accorded respect as a craftsman able to comprehend the best fashion of satisfying this goal (which, as in the examples given, often represented a vague end state which admitted of many approaches). In this thin sense, the artist was assumed to have complete autonomy

while his ends were not autonomously artistic (as it were), the artistic process was held to be transparent procedure entirely under the command of the artist himself.<sup>1</sup>

The surety of these notions jointly came under attack in the eighteenth century. As is always the case with the history of ideas this development can be traced to a number of sources, but for our present purposes we can see the central figures in the persons of Baumgarten on the one hand, and Hegel on the other.

Baumgarten's work, more clearly than Hegel's, may be seen as a codification of a diffuse intellectual trend rather than as a product of a wholly original thinker. Baumgarten serves as a convenient figure, however, as he did much to set the framework of the question of aesthetic autonomy. (The contemporary use of the term 'aesthetic' is itself owed to Baumgarten's work.) Interceding in the then fashionable study of what was known as the 'critique of taste', Baumgarten proposed a codified set of rules which were held to dictate how one should correctly produce a judgement of taste concerning both natural and artistic beauty. (This notion of set rules would later come under scrutiny from Kant, although he retained the general commitment to the cogency of the concept of taste). What is significant about Baumgarten's codified collection of rules is that they prescribe correct conduct with regard to aesthetic properties only. In other words, a judgement of taste no longer extended to consider the extra-aesthetic *function* of an artwork; it considered only the *aesthetic properties* of an artwork. Baumgarten represents the transition from an unconsidered acceptance of aesthetic heteronomy to a new philosophical culture insistent on aesthetic *autonomy*.

However, this does not represent merely the exchange of one presupposition for another. Rather the new theory of aesthetic autonomy served to introduce a genuinely new debate, which has served to determine the course of all the work on aesthetics that would follow. Theories of aesthetic autonomy are defined *against* theories of aesthetic heteronomy and vice versa; and the proliferation of aesthetic theories (autonomism, moralism, immoralism, etc.) exists solely due to the introduction of the question.

While Baumgarten introduced a transition from presuppositions of heteronomy to theories of autonomy, Hegel (coming much later in the eighteenth century) also served to explode presuppositions concerning artistic practice, although the resultant transition moved in the opposite direction. While Hegel's overall philosophy of art betrays a clear debt to other figures of the same period (most notably Kant and Schiller), in his theory of art Hegel himself serves to introduce a free question into the study of art. In brief, Hegel asserted that the history of art and art forms is not driven by the decisions of artists (or rather, not *merely*). The history of art is in fact reflective of developments in a subtending form of consciousness which is taking shape through history (which Hegel called *Geist* or 'spirit'). This form of consciousness had an internal logic and dynamic which served to drive the development of all human endeavour (including art, philosophy and the like). The upshot of this argument is that apparently autonomous spheres (like that of art) are in fact *determined* and shaped by processes external to them. As a consequence, Hegel's account entails that in fact artistic autonomy does not exist. The development of modern out of classical art is not understood as deriving from the decisions of artists, or innovations internal to art – rather, this development reflects and is shaped by, the developments taking place in the extra-aesthetic *Geist*.

As in the case of Baumgarten, it is not so much the specifics of Hegel's account but rather the structure of the question which he introduced – contention over the possibility of heteronomous determination of artistic practice – which is so important. Hegel served conclusively to undermine the 'craftsman' view of the artist, which was already beginning to seem anachronistic in light of the artistic practice taking place under the influence of Romanticism.

Hegel's innovative account is grounded in a number of exotic notions which did not survive outside of his own philosophy. The core idea, however, has been enduringly influential. This idea

one of *constitution*. Hegel does not argue that artists seek *intentionally* to reflect extra-aesthetic developments. Their artistic practice is, unbeknownst to them, *constituted* by extra-aesthetic influences and, as a result, comes to reflect these extra-aesthetic developments. It is this model of concealed constitution which has been so enduringly influential. This influence has largely spread through Marx. Marx inverted Hegel's dialectic, seeing history as driven not by a metaphysical, exotic *Geist*, but rather by material relations of exchange. Marx's material inversion allowed for the multiplication of structurally identical accounts which replaced 'human spirit' with 'relations of production'. A great deal of Marxist aesthetics explores the putative constitution relation which obtains between relations of exchange, production and the labour of the artist.

Much of modern aesthetics may be understood as taking place in the logical space which was opened up by the emergence of these two fundamental questions. These two questions also, ultimately, came to largely define the two main traditions in the philosophy of art – the analytic and (for want of a better term) the continental. I will now explore the specific features of the debates over aesthetic and artistic autonomy in more detail, and also look at how the two competing traditions understand these questions.

## 1

This volume looks at the philosophy of *aesthetic judgements* (accounts of what is involved in the judgement of an artwork's quality) and theories of *artistic practice* (accounts of what is involved in the creation of an artwork). It is a matter of history that the analytic aesthetic tradition has traditionally contested the former in the main, the better to solidify its position on the latter, while the continental tradition has traditionally expended more energy on contesting the latter, the better to formulate intricate theories of the former. These two opposing approaches do reveal some of the contrasting strengths of the two traditions, as well as the complexity of the issue under consideration.

### **Aesthetic autonomy**

In investigating aesthetic autonomy, we are investigating the extent to which the subject's *judgement* of an artwork is either *sui generis* (addressing itself and being sensitive to nothing but 'aesthetic value') or, by contrast, at least partially constituted by sensitivity to other kinds of value. As should be apparent by its focus on questions of aesthetic *judgement* and – by extension – aesthetic *experience*, the consideration of aesthetic autonomy is a jointly *descriptive* and *prescriptive* endeavour. What we are after is (1) an explanation of the preconditions of an aesthetic judgement and, deriving from this, (2) an account of that which should and should not figure in an aesthetic judgement. The multiple positions which one can take on the correct nature of this descriptive and prescriptive analysis spring neatly around the question of whether these aesthetic judgements – and experiences – are *autonomous* (addressed solely to aesthetic properties) or *heteronomous* (aesthetic experience and judgement being produced by other properties – such as moral or cognitive – alongside aesthetic properties).

The decision one makes on this issue is of the greatest significance, redounding to the nature of the discipline of aesthetics itself. If one decides – as many do – that aesthetic judgements *are* bound up with heteronomous material, then the very boundaries of the discipline of aesthetics itself begin to become more porous, and interdisciplinary collaboration becomes more urgent. For example, the decision that aesthetic judgements are partly prescribed by historical contexts in turn entails the necessity of acquiring detailed historical knowledge concerning the context of great artworks, in order

to preserve proper appreciation of the canon. And hence, art history acquires an integral role in the appreciation of art. Similarly, if aesthetic value comes to be entwined with cognitive complexity, truth, or moral content, then we will require accounts deriving from theories of cognition, epistemology, or moral philosophy in order to complete our account of aesthetic judgement. In every case it becomes necessary to *supplement* the account of aesthetic appreciation by means of providing further theoretical support for art appreciation's putative reliance on extra-aesthetic content. The question of autonomy then, also becomes a question of disciplinary independence. It is in accord with this general feature of problems of autonomy (which we will also see when looking at *artistic* autonomy) that this collection has been intentionally organized along broadly interdisciplinary lines.

In line with what we saw earlier about the characteristic inflections of analytic and continental aesthetics, this question of aesthetic autonomy is largely considered in this collection by analytic aestheticians, and those drawn from other traditions who hew more closely to the analytic treatment of these concerns.

## Artistic autonomy

In investigating *artistic* autonomy, we are attempting to arrive at a *descriptive* account of the *constitution* of the artist's practice and – by extension – of the *constitution* of the artwork itself. The prescriptive element of this kind of account is comparatively far more subdued. As was delineated earlier, this kind of investigation is far newer than that into aesthetic autonomy. Just as before, the question of the autonomy of the artist has ramifications for the integrity of the disciplinary distinctions involved. In viewing the artist as *autonomous*, we are asserting that the artist's activity is not determined by any extra-aesthetic influence. The aesthetic processes that are involved in creating the artwork are self-constituting and do not depend upon or necessarily reflect extra-aesthetic processes (e.g. economic, cultural or political processes). The artist, then, conducts his work solely in accord with the aesthetic principles and impulses which he feels are appropriate. Interestingly, this view has a significant impact on one's theory of the aesthetic content of an artwork. With the possible exception of music and extreme examples of non-figurative visual art, artworks are ineluctably bound up with the non-artistic. An artwork's formal properties can only be constructed through the importation of heteronomous content as organizing principles (as, for example, in the dependence of *Anna Karenina* on historical detail and facts concerning moral psychology; in the dependence of Brahms' *German Requiem* on the Luther Bible, etc.). In this sense, there is (what it is tempting to call) an ineluctable dependence of art on heteronomy. If one opts for a theory of artistic autonomy, this dependence must be allowed for, but explained in such a way that this constitutive dependence of artistic autonomy on heteronomy either does not thereby introduce heteronomous content into the artwork, or this heteronomous content is incorporated without thereby becoming relevant to the *aesthetic* status of the artwork. The former option is really quite extreme, and consists in claiming that the imported content is reworked by the artwork such that it becomes indistinguishable from its autonomous formal properties. This position is best represented by A. C. Bradley's theory of poetry, wherein form and content are held to be unified; or the radical formalism of Adorno's global theory of art in *Aesthetic Theory*. Although these two examples of course differ, the important common factor is that the artwork's reliance on non-aesthetic content becomes an occasion for the artwork's *absorption* and *retranslation* of this content. While the artist may, say, appear to trace the course of a moral argument (as Zola does in *Germinal*, for example) this is *mere* appearance; it is the upshot of aesthetic decisions taken by an artist following the relevant aesthetic features of his work. The apparent moral content, while discernible, did not influence the course of the artwork's creation *qua* moral content.

but rather only through whatever aesthetic properties it may possess. This strategy, then, concedes the artwork's dependence on the extra-aesthetic, but imputes to aesthetic creation the ability to transform extra-aesthetic content such that it becomes solely aesthetic content.

The second option is far more familiar. This consists in accepting that the artwork (as a matter of contingency) can import or reflect certain heteronomous contents. For example, a novel may serve as an accurate record of the moral mores of its time; as a means of moral enlightenment; or as an instantiation of certain political arguments. In this view, then, the artwork is in fact a composite of autonomous and heteronomous contents. However, the heteronomous contents which may be discerned and enjoyed by the onlooker are held to be incidental and inessential.

Thus, an assertion that artistic autonomy comes with a need for an account which shows the dependence of (most) kinds of art on heteronomy does not in fact lead to this heteronomy in any way constituting or determining the aesthetic content of the artwork.

The alternative is to view the artist's activity as *heteronomous*. In claiming that the artist's creative work is *heteronomous* we do not of course claim that the artist's work is heteronomous *simpliciter* – we do not claim that the artist's work is not after all artistic but in fact reducible to some other practice. Rather, in positing artistic work as heteronomous, we claim that the artist's work is, in an important fashion, constituted or determined by heteronomous influences or processes. A paradigmatic example of such a position is found in the *Abbildungstheorie* employed by some Marxist aestheticians (most notably in the work of Louis Althusser or Georg Lukács). This *Abbildungstheorie* (or 'reflection theory') holds that the nature of the artwork is determined by the socio-historical context in which the artist's activity is taking place. As such, the artist is incapable of acting autonomously – his artistic decisions, and the horizon of the possible decisions which he can entertain, are preformed due to the influence of external processes. As one would expect, this theory of artistic heteronomy has consequences for one's theory of the nature of artworks. As we saw when examining artistic *autonomy*, the artwork ineluctably contains non-aesthetic content which the viewer can discern (moral content; historical content, etc.). As one would expect, if a theory of artistic *autonomy* is able to accommodate the presence of non-aesthetic content, so too is a theory of artistic *heteronomy*. In this respect, the theory of artistic heteronomy entails no great theoretical difference from that of artistic autonomy. In both cases, the presence of non-aesthetic content is conceded and, in both cases, the presence of content of this specific kind (e.g. the historical details which one can choose to glean from a story) is held to be not strictly relevant to the aesthetic properties of the artwork. The interest and innovation of the artistic heteronomy account comes when looking at artistic heteronomy's theory of the *constitution* of aesthetic properties themselves.

One can say that for a believer in artistic autonomy, the aesthetic properties are self-constituting, which is to say that the investigation of the artwork's aesthetic nature is arrested at the surface or, as it were, technical level. In enquiring into the aesthetic constitution of, say, the visual or musical arts, the explanation and description of the aesthetic level of achievement will be ultimately arrested with statements about the constitution of these aesthetic properties: the proficiency of the recapitulation of a given sonata; the execution of perspective in a given artwork. (The outlier position comes with accounts which, in cases of interpretive ambiguity, appeal to the artist's intentions in order to better fix their account of the aesthetic properties; as when one might be unsure if a play is tragic or comic.) For the most part, then, aesthetic analysis remains firmly arrested within the artwork itself. On the one hand, the hermeneutic content of the artwork is held to be determined solely by the artwork itself, and the tradition within which it is situated. The artwork signifies and portrays by virtue of its apparent properties, and the network of signifying conventions in which it is situated. On the other, the artist's decisions in constructing the artwork are held to represent, at the very worst, his own aesthetic intentions and, at the very best, the artist's pure engagement with the formal demands of his material.

This transparency of the artist's action, and the hermeneutic scope of his work, is undermined by the theory of artistic heteronomy. The theory of artistic heteronomy holds that the artist's activity is in fact constituted and determined by extra-aesthetic processes. The paradigmatic example of this approach is the psychological style of analysis pioneered by Freud (as, for instance, in his analysis of Michelangelo's statue of Moses) or the Marxist style of analysis touched on earlier. In either case, the core claim is that the artist's activity and, by extension, the artist's creative decisions are intrinsically determined by extra-aesthetic influences and processes. For example, a familiar trope of Marxist analysis concerns the dependence of artistic production on a division of labour which is capable of exempting him from the demands of menial labour. Understood in this fashion, as a basic claim about the determining *preconditions* for artistic endeavour, this theory is of limited interest, and most likely trivially true.

However, this aspect of the theory of artistic heteronomy is rarely, if ever, found without a further commitment to the consequences of this determination of artistic procedures for aesthetic properties themselves. The consequence of this heteronomous determination, it is claimed, is an expansion of the hermeneutic scope of the aesthetic properties. The aesthetic properties of an artwork no longer merely signify aesthetic content, but are themselves held to intrinsically bear extra-aesthetic content. In essence, the purely formal or purely aesthetic properties of an artwork are held to be reflective of even – in some varieties of theories of artistic heteronomy – critical of the extra-aesthetic. The earliest and most influential theory of note in this vein was Hegel's. Hegel, for example, held that the ongoing increase in abstraction which took place in art's movement from early cultic art, to Greek sculpture, to the artwork of 'romantic' modernity did not merely reflect developments in the aesthetic itself, but that the fact was driven by the development of human 'Geist'. As such, the aesthetic properties of romantic artworks testify not merely to the decisions of the artist, but also intrinsically provide information about a subtending heteronomous narrative which determined that artwork. A great many of the 'continental' accounts of artistic heteronomy expend much of the complexity of their accounts on investigating this relation between aesthetic content and the extra-aesthetic.<sup>2</sup>

Accordingly, this conception of artistic heteronomy usually entails a commitment to theories of aesthetic heteronomy. Contemplation and judgement of aesthetic properties come to have an intrinsic dependence on the heteronomous content embedded in the aesthetic properties – in turn, the nature of an aesthetic judgement can become expanded, and become judgement not merely of art, but also of the heteronomous content embedded in the artwork itself. The most beguiling consequence of this approach has been the attempt to understand the artwork as in fact a site for political action, or social critique (paradigmatic examples being found in the work of Georg Lukács, Jacques Rancière, Raymond Williams and Walter Benjamin).

## 2

It is clear that the analytic and continental traditions split reasonably neatly in tandem with the two investigations into aesthetic and artistic autonomy, respectively. It is also clear that each tradition has had undeniable success in confining their attention to each of these two spheres. However, there is a strong dependence relationship between these two spheres. Much of the analytic debate (regardless of its position on aesthetic autonomy) takes for granted the idea that artistic autonomy obtains. This is a risky strategy, as the continental tradition provides a number of strong reasons for believing that in fact artistic autonomy is problematic.

By contrast, the continental tradition has been seen to be too eager to reduce the artwork to an epiphenomenon or mere signifier of extra-aesthetic processes which are held to be of *real* interest.



Freudian (more recently, perhaps, Lacanian) and broadly Marxist accounts have been undeniably guilty of this elision of the aesthetic in favour of forcing the artwork to conform to broader theoretical commitments. As a result, while continental theories have found qualified success in embedding artistic practices in broader contexts, and tracing the bleeding through of extra-aesthetic values, forms and priorities into the aesthetic, this has been accompanied by a reduced aptitude for making finer grained analyses of various kinds of aesthetic phenomena. (For example, it is notable that even Adorno, one of the most complex and accomplished aestheticians of the continental tradition, often remained content with making assertions about art *simpliciter*, with not nearly enough attention being paid to the important kinds of differences between the various aesthetic media.)

This distinction between the ‘traditions’ should not cause us to question what the future relationship between the traditions should be, but should rather cause us to question the very existence of these traditions at all. Aesthetics is perhaps uniquely placed in philosophy (most likely along with ethics) in that the ultimate arbiter of the success of an aesthetic theory is immediately available to the experienced observer – namely, fidelity to the object of discussion. While continental philosophy has a tendency to telescope its perspective outside of the artwork and to pay exhaustive attention to the context and history of the artwork, and the analytic tradition has a tendency to confine itself to finer grained questions internal to aesthetic experiences and judgements themselves, it is clear that an exhaustive, and internally coherent, account of the artwork must broach both of these perspectives. As such, it is the hope of this collection (and its editor) to emphasize neither analytic nor continental approaches to the artwork, but merely to emphasize the artwork itself.

## Notes

- 1 This is admittedly complicated in the case of religious artistic practice, especially in the medieval era, where the notion of being an impersonal conduit for God’s action is introduced (a notion, oddly, that reappears later in modified, secular form in the Romantic movement).
- 2 The most significant living proponent of this approach must be Jacques Rancière, who combines both a broadly psychological model (as found in *The Aesthetic Unconscious*) with a more Hegelian attempt to see the internal logic of artistic practice reflecting, and intervening in, deeper features of the social constitution of the visible (as found in *The Politics of Aesthetics*).



# Indifferent to Intentions: The Autonomy of Artistic Meaning<sup>1</sup>

*Paul Crowther*

## Preface

*I work in an idiom of post-analytic phenomenology that seeks to overcome the great tribal division between analytic philosophy and the continental tradition. This involves a critical overcoming of the limitations of both. For example, rather than focusing on how we talk about art (as in analytic aesthetics), a post-analytic phenomenology prefers to describe the character of the art object itself as a made or assembled sensuously significant artefact – and to consider the complex cognitive basis of such artifice (both in its own right and in terms of the observer’s aesthetic experiences of it). An approach such as this takes the great traditions of artistic making in both Western and non-Western cultures as its paradigm. There is a place for Western conceptualism within this, but as a marginal factor rather than a central factor. The analytic tradition in contrast reverses this relation. It attempts to wag the body of art by its tail.*

*However, where my approach does intersect with analytic aesthetics is in its insistence upon clear and rigorous structures of argument and consideration of potential counter-arguments and examples. A great deal of continental aesthetics rests on asserting rather than arguing obscure ideas, and often takes obscurity to be tantamount to profundity.*

*It should be emphasized that the division I am working to overcome has grown even greater as my career has developed. Nowadays, the two tribes scarcely acknowledge one another as philosophers, let alone critically engage with one another. Sad, of course, but the search for truth must go on irrespective of tribal taboos...*

## Introduction

The idea of art having autonomy of meaning is not fashionable. In the field of literary and cultural and historical studies, for example, there is a considerable emphasis on how meaning is bound up with a work’s relation to those intentions and social conditions which informed the original circumstances of its production. And even if – as in some recent postmodern thought<sup>2</sup> – the intelligibility of specific artistic intentions is queried, the artwork’s capacity to express its producer’s broader attitude towards power, race, class and gender relations has become an article of faith for feminist and postcolonial theory.

These contextualist approaches find a broad parallel in the institutional and related definitions of art propounded by Danto, Dickie and Levinson (among others). For such thinkers, the decisive factor in constituting art is not the making of an artefact, but the way in which an artefact (or relevant state of affairs) directs us towards the creator’s intentions or theory concerning its artistic status and function.

On these terms meaning is *necessarily* tied to what the artist intends, or to cultural issues

contemporary with its creation, or to related factors which members of the art world take to be posited by the work. The original circumstances of production are paramount.

In this chapter, I will not undertake a sustained refutation of this emphasis.<sup>3</sup> Rather, I want to open up an alternative approach which rethinks artistic meaning by emphasizing the normative theory of art. This approach holds that art has distinctive and intrinsically valuable properties which are mediated by a work's position in the relevant tradition of artistic *making*.<sup>4</sup>

On the basis of this, we can posit an autonomous dimension of artistic meaning and value, which is, in *logical* terms, indifferent to empirical knowledge or historical theory concerning the artist's original intentions and attitudes.

One must stress that 'autonomy' in this context does not amount to the 'ahistorical'. Indeed, the theory proposed is one which assigns the most decisive importance to the work's phenomenal structure interpreted in relation to the *diachronic history* of the artifactual practice of which it is an instance.

The emphasis here is on the way in which the historical distinctiveness of an artist's treatment of his or her medium is *conceptually connected* to the autonomously significant artistic meaning which can be the outcome of such a treatment. *This approach embodies a creator- rather than a consumer-based conception of art.*

To establish these claims I will, in Part one, adapt and generalize a conceptual schema first formulated by Erwin Panofsky. After a lengthy development of its implications for art and the aesthetic, I will, in Part two, consider and dismiss some putative objections to these implications. In Part three, I will take my approach much further by analysing some specific ways in which the artwork can generate autonomous meaning.

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## Part one

To recognize an artefact is to locate it in terms of some code governing its human function. They usually involve function in a strict sense, i.e. ‘*this* is (or is probably) used for *that*’. Art, however, represents a problem, since it is a function of various intersecting codes pertaining to the particular media involved, and to how these media are interpreted.

Even more problematic is that it transcends mundane criteria of functionality. In non-Western cultures especially, a major importance is assigned to the *formative* dimension of art. This centres on the process of making, as well as the end product; and on an audience involvement which involves complex patterns of participation rather than the consumer-orientated notions of ‘reading’ and ‘consumption of meaning’ which characterize recent Western stereotypes of art interpretation.<sup>5</sup>

However, there is one area that can be focused on in a way which (eventually) takes us beyond the Western stereotype. It takes as its premiss the fact that, in the broadest terms, art *represents*.<sup>6</sup> That is to say the artwork embodies *semantic* codes and is thence to be interpreted as referring to things other than to itself. (This is even true of ‘self-referential’ work, insofar as the recognition of self-referentiality logically presupposes contrasts with other works.)

There are three major aspects to the semantics of representation. In what follows, I shall loosely adopt and refine a schema originally devised by Erwin Panofsky in relation to the visual arts.<sup>7</sup>

The most basic element in this schema I shall call the *protosymbolic*.<sup>8</sup> It has two constitutive aspects. The first is determined by reference to *kinds* of subject matter, syntactically related to one another. For example, one could not describe something as a picture, poem or story unless one could say in principle what *kind* of general state of affairs the picture is ‘of’, or the poem or story nominally ‘about’.

The second basic aspect concerns the formal structure of a work. One would not have comprehended a work in its perceptual or imaginatively intended entirety without experience of the specific ways in which parts of its phenomenal fabric relate to other parts, and to the whole. In music, of course, key systems (or the absence of them) involve a kind of merging of syntactic and formal elements.

To understand these two aspects of the protosymbolic is to acquire the most basic competence in relation to an artefactual code. Once one has acquired such a competence, the representation is basically intelligible without reference to external context.

In the case of the next element in the Panofskian schema – namely the *iconographic* aspects of the code – matters are very different. Iconography addresses what are (in strict logical, if not existential and historical terms) *secondary* meanings – the ‘symbolic’ dimension in its most familiar sense.

Specifically, the iconographical aspect of a work consists in making the protosymbolic dimension more specific. Instead of centring on the kind of thing being represented, it gravitates, rather, around the more particular individuals or culturally specific states of affairs to which the artist intentionally alluding.

These can, of course, be real items, persons or situations (or ones which previously existed), or ones derived from myth or fiction or the imagination. There is, indeed, a further aspect to this, insofar as such elements can also serve as allegories or metaphors for more general meanings.

Whichever inflection of the iconographical we address, there is one decisive condition which governs such meaning, namely that it can *only* be interpreted on the basis of factors external to the basic protosymbolic level of the code.

One needs, for example, an understanding of the literary or broader cultural sources being drawn

on; or a knowledge of the artist's biography or of the causal context in which the work was produced and, indeed, the audience it was directed towards. One needs, in other words, a knowledge of the immediate *synchronic* historical circumstances surrounding the work's production.

In cultures where historical awareness has to some degree institutionalized itself (e.g. through art being figured as an object of academic study) a third level of reference – which Panofsky calls the *iconological* – has to be considered. In such cultures, past representations always manifest themselves *as* historical, i.e. as different from those which are produced under present conditions.

This difference is enabled by the fact that artists in such cultures, consciously or not, absorb broader influences from their historical epoch, and manifest this in the style and content of the representations they produce. The upshot is that their works can be related to broader patterns of production, value and belief, which were current at the time of their creation.

Recent feminist and postcolonialist emphases on representation's embodiment of attitudes of power, class, race and gender direct one's attention to this. So does the once fashionable Marxist notion of *ideology*. These are both specific inflections of the more global notion of iconology.

On these terms, then, to interpret a representation as a representation involves a basic competence in the code (i.e. protosymbolic meaning), and (according to the more specific nature of the representation or interpretational intentions), a knowledge of the iconographic and iconological dimensions of meaning.

The question arises, then, of how these factors relate to our aesthetic engagement with art. A first important point is that since in addressing an aesthetic object *qua* aesthetic object, attention is directed towards its status as a sensuous or (in the case of literature) imaginatively intended particular, we are thereby involved with it at the level of formal qualities – one aspect of what I have called the protosymbolic.

More surprisingly, there is also a necessary involvement with the other protosymbolic factor mentioned earlier, namely the work's embodiment of a semantic/syntactic code. The two factors are often separated from one another by formalist theorists, but there is a good case to be made for their complementarity.

This is because in order to recognize the distinctively artistic version of aesthetic form (or *artist's meaning* in the fullest sense) it is logically presupposed that such form is recognized to be the product of human artifice. The semantic/syntactic aspect is one aspect in this recognitional strategy, and may indeed be a key element in formal structure itself.<sup>9</sup>

There is also a further vital dimension to the recognition of artifice in the aesthetic context, for while the two protosymbolic factors are necessary conditions of art they are not sufficient. As I have argued at great length elsewhere,<sup>10</sup> in order to move from mere representation to art requires that the work is original – in the sense of being innovatory or exemplary. Such features logically presuppose reference to a horizon of diachronic and comparative history. In practice, such a context is provided by knowledge of traditions of making (using both 'tradition' and 'making' very broadly). Reference to these enables what is distinctive about an artist's treatment of form to be recognized and appreciated. It follows, accordingly, that a historical dimension is a constitutive element of artistic meaning in the fullest sense.

It is vitally important to be clear about the scope of this historical mediation. For what it does not necessarily entail is reference to synchronic questions of iconography and iconology, i.e. the role played by the immediate historical circumstances in which a work was produced and received.

Knowledge of such circumstances and specific biographical facts about the artist's life may enhance our enjoyment, but equally so they may inhibit it. We may, for example, become preoccupied solely by its historical interest, or by its ramifications in terms of present political interests. The point is that reference to the sphere of the work's immediate context (and the artist's 'intentions') is

contingent matter *vis-à-vis* responses to distinctively artistic meaning.

~~Arguments such as this are greeted with wide-eyed horror by many contemporary cultural and literary theorists and art historians. The idea that art can have a significance beyond its immediate context and the narrow political obsessions of 'Theory' is dismissed as a hangover of white, male, middle-class, Eurocentric heterosexual patriarchy. I have dealt with specious objections of this kind (and will continue to do so) elsewhere.<sup>11</sup>~~

Suffice it to say that an approach such as mine, in effect, addresses the very possibility of cultural transmission and continuity. For even when cultures clash violently, there is frequently an interest in and absorption of, the values and techniques of the other.

At the heart of this is the fact that stripped from their immediate context of origin, artistically significant artefacts have a deep-seated intrinsic fascination. In fact this removal of the original context is of positive significance, since it introduces a cultural distance which enables one to appropriate the artefact on one's own terms.

And this is the irony; the fact that the work *is* viewed in this way means that there is a kind of sharing – a fundamental compatibility between producer and interpreter – at a more *human* level. It is on this intention-indifferent basis that one may regard the aesthetic experience of art as *relative disinterested*.

True, one must take account of all aspects of its protosymbolic dimension, and the mediation of tradition, but the fact that one need not take account of the iconographical aspects of the work introduces an important element of *freedom* into our cognitive engagement with it. Indeed, it is precisely art's capacity (*qua* diachronically mediated aesthetic object) to be meaningful beyond its original contexts of production which gives it the generality requisite for a more autonomous level of significance.

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## Part two

The view I am presenting here invites some obvious philosophical questions. The first of these concerns the notion of tradition. In the most literal sense this involves relating a practice and its products to the ways in which these have been done in the past. In the case of art, this again could involve reference to iconographical strategies (i.e. specific kinds of narrow referential function) but in relation to aesthetic considerations it does not have to. Often, indeed, the original iconographical context of a work will simply have been swept away by the passage of time.

What cannot be swept away, however (unless a work is destroyed), is its protosymbolic aspect, i.e. the level of kinds of subject matter, and formal structure. This means, of course, that in relating a work to the comparative context of tradition, *stylistic* considerations are paramount.

The decisive factors are not the particular synchronic conditions of a work's immediate historical production and reception, but rather *its relations of protosymbolic sameness to and difference from other works at the diachronic level of the medium's phenomenal articulation*. The function of tradition, in other words, is to mediate the reception of the work at a relatively autonomous and aesthetic level of historicity. (I shall return to some of these points below.)

A second possible objection to my position arises from an important set of counter-examples. If we consider, say, John Martin's *Last Judgement* paintings, or Eliot's *The Waste Land* or Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, we are dealing with works which are (in the former case) standardly exhibited, (in the latter cases) published, with detailed accompanying texts clarifying the iconographical dimension of the works in question. The implication is that in the absence of such iconographical back-up the works are simply unintelligible.

This is not true. The power of these artworks consists in the relation between their 'making strange' of the traditions of landscape, poetry and the novel, respectively, and the changing historical patterns of human experience. From the internal resources of the works themselves viewed in the context of diachronic tradition, it is possible to discern specific strategies of meaning. Reference to iconographical intentions and allusions may enhance our appreciation of this, but it is not demanded as a presupposition of such appreciation.

A third putative objection to my position concerns further 'problematic' individual cases. Suppose, for example, that an archaeologist excavates a simple stone monolith that is, to all intents and purposes, perceptually indistinguishable from a work of 1960s American minimal art. In this case does not the ability to regard both as art, *and* distinguish them from one another, require very detailed iconographical analysis?

Well, in the first instance, investigation of the respective work's phenomenal fabric would reveal one to be the product of carving, and the other to have been mechanically formed. On the basis of this one could relate the archaic artefact to the tradition of a carving per se, and speculate upon its referential content – as a memorial or whatever.

In the case of the minimal work, we would regard this as one of a set of marginal cases. *The very fact* that it seems odd and in need of iconographical back-up (in contrast to the *vast* majority of works) in order to be claimed as art, of itself points to its marginal status. This should not surprise us, since any definition of art – if it is to be a definition and not merely a set of stipulations – must allow for such boundary cases. Each case of this sort must be considered on its own merits.

A final and much more serious objection to my position is as follows. The specifically artist's version of aesthetic disinterestedness outlined above is one which is based on indifference to iconographical and iconological issues. Yet, at the same time, I want to argue that such

disinterestedness actually facilitates a sharing of vision – an aesthetic empathy between producer and recipient.

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But it may be argued that this is an empty relation. For what makes an individual's vision of the world real and substantial is surely the network of actual beliefs, attitudes, ideas and intentions, which this vision is a function. Hence, it may seem that one can only make sense of a work embodying an artist's 'vision' if we can relate it to the depth of iconographical and iconological factors which are implied therein. Indeed, (the argument may continue) 'vision' in any viable philosophical sense is not a wholly private matter. It is a function of complex sets of relationships between an individual and his or her immediate social environment.

Again, therefore, in denying the importance of iconography and iconology *vis-à-vis* aesthetic responses to art, am I not severing the very factors which bind it to the expression of socially mediated vision? I will now offer a detailed response to this question, which will also illuminate the autonomous dimension of artistic meaning, in more specific terms.



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## Part three

First, a work's capacity to express anything is based on *both* main aspects of the protosymbolic dimension – the semantic/syntactic code, and formal structure. Depending on how broadly one interprets 'formal', another element could be added – the expressive *per se*. In Western culture at least, certain formal configurations, hinging on colour, shape and gesture (or in literature and music on narrative and developmental structures and resolutions), have specific ranges of emotional association. There may be some natural element in these associations, but substantially they are conventions of interpretation which are part of our general cultural stock. They are thus bound up with the protosymbolic level of meaning.

However, expression is also used in an iconographical sense when we talk of intentions, beliefs, attitudes etc. which a producer explicitly wishes to communicate to his or her audience. (There is also scope for an iconological notion of expression insofar as a producer unconsciously expresses broad social attitudes permeating the society in which he or she lives.)

To reflect on how these interrelate, let us consider a hypothetical example. Suppose an artist paints a work entitled *Pastoral Idyll*. It consists of a highly picturesque landscape, populated by idealized figures dressed in Roman attire, deep in conversation. Let us suppose also that the work is profoundly optimistic in terms of its formal and associative ambience. In protosymbolic terms the work is happy, a kind of celebration of the abundance of being.

However, let us now suppose that on finishing the work the artist committed suicide, and left behind a note. The note details his sense of outsiderliness and ennui with the art world, society and existence *per se*. It turns out, indeed, that the idealized figures are specific images of his one-time friends who have now formed a ruling cabal from which he has been pointedly excluded. Viewed in these iconographical terms, the work now appears as an expression of the deepest unhappiness and alienation.

Now, in terms of its immediate reception, the work causes great controversy. It is taken to be a profound critique of art, society and everything. It is a savagely ironic *indictment*. Does this mean, therefore, that this iconographic dimension of expression should be taken as paramount?

The answer to this question depends on one's position on the issue of socio-political reductionism. At the heart of many strains of Marxist, feminist and poststructuralist thought is a reduction of representation to a vehicle for competition with, and domination of, others. On these terms representation is fundamentally an expression of iconographical and iconological ideas, beliefs and attitudes. The means of expression – the nature of the handling of the medium itself – is itself significant only as a signifying element in the discourse of power relations which surrounds it.<sup>12</sup>

Such a distorted analysis is actually at odds with both the deeper historicity and concrete specificity of the medium itself. In this respect let us consider the *Pastoral Idyll* outlined above. Whatever the artist specifically intends, the work is, in protosymbolic terms, a happy-looking one. Indeed, every artist knows (whether he or she has it explicitly in mind or not) that the material artwork has a strong chance of outliving its creator.

This means that the work will – however weakly or strongly – address a history *other than the one entailed by the immediate circumstances of its production and reception*. It will be assessed by a diachronic tradition. No work can remain absolutely tied to its context of origin in a way that is wholly neutral to such tradition. Even a work of architecture, for example, can have its original physical context destroyed through the erection of new edifices around it.

And here is the contradiction of the iconography of expression. If a work comes into being with



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