

Aesthetic Investigations

Published on behalf of the Dutch Association of Aesthetics



Art and the Vulnerability of Subjectivity.

Author

ROB VAN GERWEN

Affiliation

UNIVERSITY UTRECHT

I. ART ~~AS~~ SCIENCE

Treating art as a science would either bash the distinction between the two or be a contradiction in terms. We may compare art with science, but must not understand it as science. In my view, modern science brought subjectivity into trouble, whereas art itself has the subjective as its main motivating force. For one, narrative arts like novels, theatre plays, and films tell stories, and are acclaimed for conveying the subjective aspect of events. Next, artistic creativity, whether in music, or indeed in any art form, aims at regulating the appreciative experience. Lastly, to assess a work's artistic merit is to look for the artist's achievement, which involves looking for the way they realised their intentions with their audiences. It is thus that one wants to say that art is concerned with the subjective, and that one wants to distinguish it sharply from how sciences treat their subject matters. Science aims for quantification and universalisation, applying its objectivist methodologies while conveying the thought that all knowledge hangs together—and that it be objectivist. In the Enlightenment, our world view was not only mechanised but also objectified. Art and aesthetics responded by dedicating themselves to the subjective.

Art is not a science: no art is turned redundant by successive developments in art; the arts do not form a logical whole, though art practice forms a pragmatic whole; no art form consists as a quantifiable whole, but presents a phenomenological set of specifications for artists and spectators; no work of art forms a quantifiable whole, and none can be paraphrased without serious

loss. The loss would be the subjective aspect. The logic of art, if one insists on using such a term, is *sui generis* artistic and involves ample reference to the subjective. What is at stake with a work of art is the subjectivity of the appreciation of the beholder, and of the achievement of the maker.¹

The history of modern aesthetics has, in different ways, taught this view. In *Aesthetica*, Alexander Baumgarten considered art to be a means for ameliorating perception so as to make it more lifelike, and extensively clear. He took science to be moving away from the singularity of perception for the sake of producing intensive deductive knowledge.² Immanuel Kant argued in his *Critique of Judgement* that the core of the aesthetic is the subjective, aesthetic, appreciative experience, both in aesthetic judgement and in the exemplary creations of genius.³ He did not treat the subjective dismissively, but as based in judgement, and as, therefore, communicable.⁴ We tend to treat the subjective negatively nowadays, because we equate it with the idiosyncratic, because we adhere to a reductive, scientific world-view. Kant distinguished aesthetic judgements, like Hume before him, from mere individual preferences.⁵ They defended an aesthetic normativity that is not amenable to logical truth or moral principle. Moreover, Kant deemed the subjective, its communicable variety, as the precondition of our *Geselligkeit*, our sociability, and as such as grounding morality—a view that we find in Richard Wollheim, as well.⁶

Phenomenologists recognised the centrality of art and its experience for phenomenological analyses.⁷ Often, works of art can be viewed as presenting the audience with the phenomenology of some perception. For instance, photos come to mind—think of Henri Cartier-Bresson’s “Behind the Gare Saint-Lazare”, 1932, of a man jumping over a pool of water, showing him hanging in mid-air. The photo shows something that someone witnessing the event should have seen, but probably did not—because the photo shows us a frozen moment of a movement.

One must wonder exactly what phenomenological analysis this photo presents us with. People perceive movements, but not frozen moments within a movement—only a camera does. The photo seems to suggest that one does see frozen moments like this—one merely does not consciously register it. The phenomenological suggestion is, however, more of a question than a claim: do we really also see these frozen moments when we see movement? Someone might view the photo as verification of a causal theory of perception that understands perception as the processing of data caused by light reflecting on an object. But perhaps we can construe the photo as a claim about the very difference between human perception and camera registration. A theory of perception, more viable than the causalist one, treats perception as part of our understanding of the world. Yes, our perceptual organs must have met these objective data, the light waves and frozen moments, but these are not things that we are able to perceive.⁸ Perception, in this sense, is subjective: something veridical someone does. Perception is something a person does, not his sub-personal modules.⁹ Nor is perception a set of fixed snap shots,

let alone a single one of these.¹⁰ Cartier-Bresson’s photo merely shows that cameras register the world unlike how humans perceive it—and the evidence, one could say, invites a phenomenological analysis everyone should be capable of making.

The friction between science and the subjective is also clearly at stake in *The Dialectics of Enlightenment*. Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer argue here that the sciences attempt to understand the world and everything in it in objective terms, and in doing this, they intentionally exclude the concrete particular, the singular. Adorno and Horkheimer recount and interpret a scene from Homer’s *Odyssey* where Odysseus, forewarned by Circe, has himself tied to the mast, while his rowers, their ears plugged with bees’ wax, row past the island of the Sirens, allowing Odysseus to enjoy their beautiful singing without being capable to land and be captured by the Sirens. In the view of Adorno and Horkheimer this story models how scientists are required to restrict their own person to produce operationable insights through experiments that can be repeated by everyone who is likewise willing to restrict their subjectivity to reduce the impact of the context of discovery, in favour of the context of legitimation where the deductions have their place. According to Adorno, the net result of this is that the concrete particular itself—read: subjectivity, art, individuality—becomes the other of scientific knowledge.¹¹

Sheryl Tuttle Ross and Aaron Golec argue, in this issue, that according to Adorno and Horkheimer “the full-force dedication to the ideals of reason which permeates every aspect of contemporary life creates the grounds for totalitarian regimes or at the very least for a culture that is rationally assimilated and authoritarian.” They also argue that contemporary culture industry does not produce the individual’s freedom as modern rationality claims. The antidote would be laughter, but not the terrible variety known from our responses to culture industry, but a reconciled variety. Such ephemeral liberation may be the best response available to the monolithic rationality of modern science.

II. WHICH SUBJECTIVITY?

But subjectivity has acquired a bad name. Many will think of the internet where everyone can say whatever they like—present their preferences at will, whether these are upbuilding or downgrading.¹² But art is not about that type of subjectivity: not about our idiosyncratic preferences, but about the shareable kind of subjectivity that forms the centre of perception. And the idiosyncratic is not all bad either, by the way—it is merely irrelevant for artistic appreciation. What then is wrong with the idiosyncratic type of subjectivity? For one, idiosyncratic subjectivity is not easily shared, if at all, because it is caused, and caused by some singular event, and there is no way to establish the measure in which it suits the situation that caused it, nor does there seem much need for such norms of correctness. The idiosyncratic

is not normative.

For the pride that we feel for our idiosyncratic memories this is not a problem: we simply know of ourselves that we hold these preferences, and they motivate us to experience value and to lead our lives. The cognitive and moral principles that we hold merely guide our actions—our power of judgement decides the choices that we should make. We sorely need the idiosyncratic for bringing back memories that cannot be retrieved otherwise, not by reasoning or by active retrieval, but randomly. Our associations confront us with the reality of our own histories. Thus, we may have forgotten all about certain events, when one day we pass a bush with a typical scent, which brings out all sorts of idiosyncratic feelings and images from back then; and this may make us realise what type of person we were then, which things happened in our lives in those days, who were there with us, and so on. The idiosyncratic forms an invigorating thread in one's life.

For the person that we are this is of major importance. We may come to realise this the moment when a demented person is lost to us. They lose their connections with this idiosyncratic subjectivity: when seeing their daughter these idiosyncratic memories no longer pop up randomly. Others can tell them who this woman is, relate all the stories they have available about her and about the things the demented must have gone through with their daughter, and so on, but all this knowledge will not help the demented—unless it rings true subjectively. And the subjectivity required is of the idiosyncratic kind. It cannot be made available through suitable prompting.¹³

But the idiosyncratic is also the ground for our preferences, and preferences hold some sort of normative sway over us, and over others—unwarranted. Aesthetic preferences are very unlike aesthetic judgements, as Kant argued clearly. We can enjoy a Willem de Kooning for the large planes of pink in it because we have a preference for the colour of pink, but this will not—and should not—bring other people who think nothing of the painting to view it as a great painting. You cannot explain what the perception of pink consists in to begin with, let alone why you have a preference for it.¹⁴ A preference is idiosyncratic, which is how, and why it is irrelevant in normative matters. If, on the contrary, one were to point at the manner in which the pink daubs control the other colours in the painting, how they bring the turmoil of the brown, blue and red daubs to a calm, then this does potentially allow others to see the painting as you see it, because your critical appreciation of the colours is based in a judging of its effects. What is important is: others too can point you to things happening in the painting to make you abandon your appreciative judgement.¹⁵

It is the latter type of subjectivity that art is concerned with. Artists make their works to mobilise a certain subjectivity in their audiences, and audiences seek it out by finding what the artist intended with their work, such as can be perceived out there—these perceptions we can share amongst each other. Art teaches us to converse about these things, to engage in public

critical dialogue about the artistic merit of some corpus of works, or some film, or performance, as we do abundantly. And, to be clear, such a debate is nothing like the unbounded ventilating of preferences that we find on the internet, nor is it like a scientific, or moral argument.¹⁶

The importance of art may lie in that we have to live our own lives, and this is a subjective and tragic process—as Aristotle viewed this in his *Poetics*. Life is a process led by a person who picks their plans for future actions on the basis of their views and desires. In each of these components something may go wrong and when a person realises this they will scrutinise morally their views, desires, actions and plans, in relation to their future behaviour.¹⁷ The predictions and assumptions that sciences produce may, at best, function like Delphi’s oracle, acting like self-fulfilling prophecies. It is not that science—or morality—tells us what to do in life.

III. AESTHETIC NORMATIVITY

In his later work, Ludwig Wittgenstein often discusses how we understand language by comparing this with how we understand works of art—or facial expression. The appreciative challenge with a literary passage is not: to produce a singularly best interpretation (or to describe the face to explicate its expression). We assess the meaning of a passage by reading out with the right expression, to whistle a tune in the right manner, where the rightness is audible; not something we might be able to think of in a principled scientific manner.¹⁸ Empirical science has no say in issues of aesthetic normativity. This is exclusively the domain of the subjective, and of art, as well as of aesthetics done rightly. Several contributions to this issue deal with this.

We often assume that a work of art, especially a good one, all of its own, tells its beholder of its meaning and expression, but Erik Schmidt asks what happens to the appreciator in the event a work remains puzzling: what does one see, what does one’s imagination do? Schmidt discusses works by Rauschenberg and Kafka to show how in some cases we have little control over imaginative engagement. Soraya Vasconcelos presents the artistic process as a disembodiment strategy: the materials chosen by the artist already have meaning in more normal constellations, but the artist reshuffles them to create a new one in the work. Where does one find this new meaning, but in the dark? More or less in accord with the above characterisation, Stefan Niklas suggests a new view of the so-called ‘Age of Aesthetics’, linking it to Eckart Förster’s notion of intuitive understanding. What is aesthetic certainty? Niklas speculates towards an answer to that question.

Kai-Uwe Hoffmann, in his discussion of thick aesthetic concepts, drawing on work done by Frank Sibley and Nick Zangwill, develops a view of how contextual considerations precede the selection process of thick aesthetic concepts and which normative demands are at stake there. Christopher Duarte Araujo and Paul Elias argue that instead of two flawed interpretations of Marx’s aes-

thetics, Marx's central view attributes to art an important role in allowing individuals to fully realise their creative capacities and aesthetic sensibilities. In a 'communist society', wrote Marx and Engels, 'there are no painters, but only people who engage in painting among other activities'. Should we adore Marx more or less for this? Well, Leon Culbertson and Graham McFee might object to such distinction bashing. They revive David Best's views on sport by arguing against appreciating sport merely, in my terms, from the point of view of the subjective: purposive sports remain centrally aimed at certain ends, even when they are judged aesthetically.

IV. ART AND SUBJECTIVE TRUTH

Art is not challenged to tell the truth about how things are in the world out there. Art is not journalism any more than it is science. For that reason, it makes little sense to hold truths about the world against mistakes against them as are found in fictions. Plato took the importance of art in this cognitive manner, but was corrected by Aristotle's view that factual mistakes were only minor mistakes in a work of fiction, whereas mistakes against a work's proper aims were the important flaws: to begin as a tragedy and end having your audience laugh out loud is such a grave mistake. And Hume said:

"Where any innocent peculiarities of manners are represented, [...] they ought certainly to be admitted; and a man, who is shocked with them, gives an evident proof of false delicacy and refinement. [...] But where the ideas of morality and decency alter from one age to another, and where vicious manners are described, without being marked with the proper characters of blame and disapprobation, this must be allowed to disfigure the poem, and to be a real deformity."¹⁹

Hume argued that we can tolerate factual mistakes in fiction, but might refuse to engage in a story that presents us with a society holding immoral views. Two contributions in this issue can be mapped against this background of the cognitive value of works of art.

Marie-Luise Raters defends Hegel's conception of art as appropriate for the modern secular work of art, where the criterion of a meritorious work of art is the adequate physical embodiment of mind. Of course, for Hegel, a successful work of art expresses or adds to our view of the world. I only add, from my point of view, that the measure of adequacy is due to a subjective experience. Rafe McGregor argues that some films, such as *Memento* and *Blade Runner*, produce a type of knowledge about the world—they are cognitive instruments. The view I defend in this editorial is that these works teach us what it might be like to live in a world such as is presented in these films. We would have to look at the world too, to check whether things said fit it, for these things to count as cognitive insight, and that is something other than appreciation of the film—something extra one might also want to engage in, or *not*.

Fiction is alone in offering knowledge of a kind different from truths to external, objective facts. What art—narrative arts such as literature and film included—offers its audiences is something the spectator or reader can check against themselves, during the appreciative process. Such checking is part of what appreciation consists in. I am referring to something Descartes mistakenly took to be the foundation of our scientific knowledge: the certainty that having some mental state proves it real. Hence the paradox view that we should be capable of gathering true knowledge about the world from fiction as we do from journalism. But the mental states that we are so certain about are the idiosyncratic subjective states that we cannot possibly *share* with others—we can only convey them. They are not aesthetically normative.

Two things might have been claimed instead. First, what we know so clearly and distinctly is the idiosyncratic subjectivity accompanying some insight—the core of our personal identity—but not the insight. And secondly, the type of knowledge produced here concerns the psychological plausibility of events, as they are experienced by the protagonists.

Is this why Hume thought one would refuse to engage in fictions presenting immoral societies: because this conflicts with our feelings about psychological consistency? We cannot experience the psychological reality of such an immoral system: it is not us we are reading about. It makes no sense to try to read a book from the point of view of a lion—or a bat, to connect these views to Thomas Nagel’s argument.²⁰ Some subjectivities are just too far off.

editor@aestheticinvestigations.eu

NOTES

1. For the latter, Wollheim’s chapter on individual style is convincing; Wollheim 1993a. Wollheim neatly discusses the classifications of art history as external to things we are interested in with art, such as a work’s expression, and the artist’s style.
2. Baumgarten 2007, §§ 1-22. Baumgarten presented aesthetics as a science of perception, but notwithstanding recent efforts to restore that idea; and reading how Baumgarten elaborates his position shows us that he was not after a deductive, objectivist reduction of the subjective elements in perception—but, instead, after what makes our perceptions grand, extensive and lively.
3. See Kant 1987, § 40:6, resp. § 46:3.
4. See Kant 1987, § 13:3.
5. See Kant 1987, §§ 14 and 39.
6. Kant 1987, and Wollheim 1993b.
7. See the works of Roman Ingarden, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Mikel Dufrenne. Hans-Georg Gadamer argued likewise for the hermeneutical experience, in Gadamer 1976, 1986a, and 1986b.
8. Without technological help, by a microscope, for instance. The issue illustrates Zeno’s paradoxes. The arrow, of course, reaches its aim; Achilles, of course, wins his contest with the tortoise. Movement is not a set of still moments—not in real-life, nor, even, in cinema, where some have argued that the movements that we see on the screen is an illusion, produced by the speed with which singular images are projected onto it, and that our eyes are incapable of discerning.
9. See John McDowell 1994.
10. See Alva Noë 2006.

11. See Adorno 1997, and Adorno and Horkheimer 2002.
12. Especially the negative stories seem to have most influence on subsequent “debates”. Perhaps, we assume that rationality will defend itself—and if it does not then in that measure it shows its weakness.
13. See Wollheim 2001 for the notion of suitable prompting.
14. See Kant 1987, §§ 14, and 39.
15. Again, see Wollheim 2001.
16. See van Gerwen 2004.
17. See Wollheim 1984 for this view of life as a process.
18. “A man may sing a song with expression and without expression. Then why not leave out the song—could you have the expression then?” Wittgenstein 1946, 29:2. “‘Look at a face—what is important is its expression—not its colour, size, etc.’ [...] The expression is not an *effect* of the face—on me or anyone. You could not say that if anything else had this effect, it would have the expression on this face.” Wittgenstein 1946, 30:3.
19. Hume 1757
20. See Nagel 1979a and 1979b.

REFERENCES

- Adorno, Theodor W. 1997. *Aesthetic Theory (1970)*. Translated by R. Hullot-Kentor. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Adorno, Theodor W., and Max Horkheimer. 2002. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Baumgarten, Alexander Gottlieb. 2007. *Ästhetik (Two Volumes)*. Edited by Dagmar Mirbach. Translated by Dagmar Mirbach. Hamburg: Meiner.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 1976. “Aesthetics and Hermeneutics.” In *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, edited by D.E.Linge, 95–104. Translated by D.E.Linge. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- . 1986a. *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*. Edited by Robert Bernasconi. Translated by Nicholas Walker. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- . 1986b. *Wahrheit und Methode. Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr.
- Hume, David. 1985 (1757). “Of the Standard of Taste.” In *Essays Moral Political and Literary*, edited by Eugene F. Miller, 226–250. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.
- Kant, Immanuel. 1987. *Critique of Judgment (Kritik der Urteilskraft)*. Translated by Werner S. Pluhar. Indianapolis: Hackett (orig: 1790, Berlin und Libau: Lagarde und Friederich).
- McDowell, John. 1994. “The content of perceptual experience.” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 44:190–205.
- Nagel, Thomas. 1979a. “Subjective and Objective.” In *Mortal Questions*, 196–214. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press.

- . 1979b. “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” In *Mortal Questions*, 165–80. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Noë, Alva. 2006. “Experience without the Head.” In *Perceptual Experience*, edited by Tamar Szabó Gendler and John Hawthorne, 411–33. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- van Gerwen, Rob. 2004. “Ethical Autonomism. The Work of Art as a Moral Agent.” *Contemporary Aesthetics*, vol. 2.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1938–1946. *Lectures & Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Wollheim, Richard. 1984. *The Thread of Life*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- . 1993a. “Pictorial Style: Two Views.” In *The Mind and its Depths*, 171–184. Cambridge (Mass.), London (England): Harvard University Press.
- . 1993b. “The Sheep and the Ceremony.” In *The Mind and its Depths*, 1–21. Cambridge (Mass.), London (England): Harvard University Press.
- . 2001. “On Pictorial Representation.” In *Richard Wollheim on the Art of Painting. Art as Representation and Expression*, edited by Rob van Gerwen, 13–27. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press.