

## Art, Audience and Understanding: the Case of Dance

Graham McFee

### *Introduction*

For reasons that should become apparent, my concern here with the nature of our *understanding* of dances directs my attention primarily to those dances that are (also?) artworks. And, while there is less here *explicitly* about *dance* than I should have liked (less dance examples, as it were), fundamental to these concerns are features or properties which (I will urge) are *shared* by artworks. So many of my examples *here* are drawn from the other arts.

I begin from the fact that our appreciation, judgement (etc.) of artworks differs in important ways from our appreciation, judgement (etc.) of all the other things in which we take an aesthetic interest, even though both might be characterised in terms of a concern with grace, line, and so on — or their opposites. That is, I begin from an *artistic/aesthetic* distinction.<sup>1</sup> And, while acknowledging the diversity *within* the aesthetic side of this contrast,<sup>2</sup> my own interest lies in *artistic* appreciation, *artistic* judgement, and so on.

Asked to *motivate* this contrast between artistic and aesthetic, I would (first) point to the difference in our interest in the great painting and in the wallpaper on the wall on which it hangs — that we value each (in a non-monetary way) but that we do so differently; we would not, say, *confuse* one with the other without misleading ourselves. Then (second), having made out the distinction for one artform, I would urge it quite generally. Thus the grace of the roadsweeper (or the gymnast) should be contrasted with that of the dancer: to this degree at least, art-status should be seen as *transfigurational*.<sup>3</sup> Further, I would indicate how artistic appreciation, artistic judgement (etc.) locates the artwork in question in the history and traditions of artmaking and art-appreciating in the artform (and, perhaps, that *genre*, etc.). So that a failure to know or understand counts against one's possibilities of making (genuine) artistic judgements — artistic judgements — that is, judgements *true* of the artworks before

---

<sup>1</sup> See David Best, *Philosophy and Human Movement* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1978), 113-116; *The Rationality of Feeling* (London: Falmer Press, 1992), 165-180; Graham McFee, *Understanding Dance* (London: Routledge, 1992), cited as "UD", 42-44, 168-182.

<sup>2</sup> Most explicitly in "Art, Beauty and the Ethical", read to a Joint Conference of the British Society of Aesthetics/Dutch Society for Aesthetics, Antwerp, September 1996. See also Graham McFee "Technicality, Philosophy and Dance-Study" in G. McFee, ed., *Dance, Education and Philosophy* (Aachen: Meyer & Meyer, 1999), 155-188, esp. 169.

<sup>3</sup> Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981); UD 51-52.

one. The first corollary (of the artistic/aesthetic contrast) is that one's calling a painting, say, *gaudy* will amount to something different when one recognises that the painting *is* an artwork from what it amounted to when one mistook the gaudy object for, say, wallpaper.

The key case here, of course, concerns the term "beauty": if I (mis)take something for an artwork, and find it beautiful, my now coming to recognise that it is *not* an artwork will *not* leave that judgement unaffected — rather, it will affect the judgement "not by raising or lowering that judgement, but by knocking it sideways" (MID 174<sup>4</sup>): even if I continue to regard the object as beautiful, its beauty will amount to something different. So one cannot *just* say, "Well, OK, it is not art but I still find it beautiful"; for what one meant by the term "beauty" is implicated — hence the "still" ("I *still* find it beautiful") is unjustified!

A second corollary of the artistic/aesthetic contrast is that taking an artwork for a (merely) aesthetic object is *mistaking* it, *misperceiving* it. One kind of misperception would be taking an artwork in a way that *couldn't* or *didn't* treat it as an artwork: hearing the atonal music as though it were birdsong. Or again, as though it were *poor* tonal music. A similar kind of misperception would beset those ignorant of the conventions etc. of that artform: just as David Best,<sup>5</sup> although knowing nothing of Indian Dance, is entranced by the quality of movement in Ram Gopal's dance — while recognising that he is unable to treat it as art.

The third corollary grows from these two: that artworks have a value (of a non-monetary kind) not in principle shareable with (mere) aesthetic objects — this kind of value is not easy to characterise, of course: but, as a first shot, we might talk of the kind of *meaning* appropriate to artworks. To see the object (say, the dance) as an art-object (not a mere aesthetic object) *just is* to ascribe this sort of meaning.

To be clear: my aim here is not to *limit* the realm of what is (or could be) art — much less to impose some narrow limit on it (*pace* Korsmeyer, Shusterman).<sup>6</sup> But I *am* urging that someone who argues that such-and-such is *art* is thereby committed to find such-and-such *valuable* in ways typical of art:<sup>7</sup> that is why the person insists on the term "art"! And thereby

<sup>4</sup> Richard Wollheim, *The Mind and Its Depths* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), cited as "MID".

<sup>5</sup> Best, *Philosophy and Human Movement*, 115; *The Rationality of Feeling*, 171.

<sup>6</sup> Carolyn Korsmeyer "Food and the Taste of Meaning" in P. van Bonsdorff and Arto Haapala, eds., *Aesthetics in the Human Environment* (Lahti: International Institute of Applied Aesthetics, 1999), 90-104, esp. 103; Richard Shusterman *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 18-21.

<sup>7</sup> NB there is a commitment to value in the minimal sense that art-status gives one reason to ascribe value to the objects — but this may be defeated: see Graham McFee "The Logic of Appreciation in the Republic of Art", *British Journal of Aesthetics* 29 (1989): 230–238, and compare Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (New York: Scribners, 1969, 253 and 253 n.) on intention: "I do not wish to claim that everything we find in a work of art is something we have to be prepared to say that the artist intended to put there. But I am claiming that our not being so prepared must be exceptional" (253); "Our concept of a work of art is such that what is not intended in it has to be thought of, or explained, in contrast to intention, at the same level as intention, as the qualification of a human action" (253 n.). What goes for intention goes equally for some

committed to contrasting the (appropriate) perception of such-and-such *as art* with the *misperception* of it as merely aesthetic — that is, as being graceful etc. etc. (or its opposites) but *only* in the manner of the wallpaper in our earlier example, not of the painting.

Further, an object or practice might be *mistaken* for art; its *grace*, etc., might lead someone to take it for art, but be wrong so to do — although, in any particular case, whether or not this were so *might* be at best arguable. Yet it wouldn't be for, say, American Ghost Dances, if the description of them I quote elsewhere [UD 286<sup>8</sup>] were correct; namely, as having “the very specific . . . purpose of restoring lost lands and traditions”. For, whatever the purpose of dance, it is not this! So accepting this characterisation of the Ghost Dances is accepting the (negative) conclusion: these are not artworks. Hence, someone urging that these *were* indeed artworks must be contesting some aspects of that description.

That artworks (such as dances) can be *misperceived* either as merely aesthetic or in an inappropriate category identifies a quite general constraint here: for, in treating the artworks (in virtue of *being* artworks) as amenable to kinds of *misunderstanding*, it recognises them as objects of understanding. Here, this very *general* possibility of understanding (or of meaning, as artworks embody it) is another way of talking about the *publicity* of artworks; of those works necessarily having the *possibility* of an audience, since they are *possible* objects of misunderstanding.

So, this account *builds-in* the idea of artworks as objects of understanding (in principle); and hence the idea of an audience for art. As Stanley Cavell puts it: “It is tautological that art has, is meant to have, an audience, however small or special. The ways in which it sometimes hides from its audience, or baffles it, only confirms this”.<sup>9</sup>

If this were right, it would be crucial to characterise artistic appreciation so as to essentially *include* a third-person perspective, that of the audience. This idea has numerous consequences: if we consider, say, *research* in the arts as a contribution to knowledge or understanding, it identifies *whose* knowledge or understanding is at issue — that it should be the knowledge or understanding of the audience! And we will return to this feature once we have said a little more about audiences, communication and meaning.<sup>10</sup>

Here I offer a fairly thin and abstract discussion — with too few dance examples — of what this might mean for how (if at all) dance might be taken as “a primary source of understanding”: hence of the degree to which, if at all, “dance . . . could inform the language

---

other artistic properties — including artistic value.

<sup>8</sup> The quotation is from P. Spencer, ed., *Society and the Dance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 2.

<sup>9</sup> Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, xxvii.

<sup>10</sup> One feature of the importance identified here (which is artistic importance): that such a third-person interest would not be required for aesthetic appreciation, which is amenable to performers' rendering.

and methods of thinkers” [both quotes from conference flyer — but not treated negatively]. My thought is that one cannot locate the relevant *possibilities* of dance unless one locates them as *artistic* possibilities; and that this, in turn, has consequences for who can learn what (or know what) from whom. And the emphasis on *audiences* will be crucial if we were tempted to locate such possibilities within, say, dancers or choreographers.

### I.

To properly make out the connection between intention and understandability requires one to reshape, perhaps simultaneously, one’s account of artistic judgement (as based on what is *known*) and one’s view of how an artist might fail to contribute what is then taken from a particular work. For example, suppose someone offers an account of Matthew Bourne’s *Swan Lake* (1995),<sup>11</sup> with its “radical gender twist . . . [in which] . . . Odette became a male Swan and Odile a louche freebooter”, an account that stresses Bourne’s use of Freudian ideas: we should not reject such an account *simply* because Bourne tells us that he did not think of it nor, even, that he has never read Freud! He might have forgotten, or have picked up Freudian ideas in other ways. But we should *reject* (or at least modify extensively — in terms of “precursors”, perhaps) a similar account of the Ivanov and Petipa *Swan Lake* (1895): since Ivanov and Petipa *predate* Freud, they cannot be seen as drawing on his *ideas* — at best, there might be Freudian *themes* at work. Roughly, that they could not *intend* to refer to Freud’s ideas guarantees that they *do not*. Yet the fact that Bourne did not *explicitly* plan to draw on Freud does not have the same implication.

In effect, the two conditions here mirror more general constraints; (a) *mere* intending is not enough (“wishing cannot make it so”), since one must achieve (to some degree) what is intended, while (b) the *mere* fact that one could *justify* a certain account of an object (by reference to public features *claimed* for it)<sup>12</sup> does not make that account of the object *true*: one is not thereby *justified* in so understanding it! So one central topic for a longer paper here — to which we will return briefly (§ III) — concerns what is *there* in an artwork . . . what its properties or features are.

Central to artistic judgement is the recognition of another’s view (key for communication) and of that view as *meant* (key for intention). These are two aspects of one point. For the idea of *communication* is (essentially) related to that of *meaning*. Indeed, any “learning” not so based in (at least *implied*) intention could not figure as a contribution to *meaning*: as when my boss learns from my yawning that I am bored by/at the meeting — the very last thing I’d hoped

---

<sup>11</sup> See Judith Mackrell, *Reading Dance* (London: Michael Joseph, 1997), 32, for the quotation, although not (quite) this reading.

<sup>12</sup> Of course, the claim must then be justified — or at least argued — by reference to the work’s public features (whatever they are).

for! There is no (genuine) communication here, and no meaning, just because my behaviour lacks both the required kind of *intention* and (therefore?) anything *specific* to communicate. These fit together: there cannot be anything to communicate (since nothing was intended) and the lack of intention implies that there is no “message” to be communicated (or to fail to be communicated, or to misfire in communication, etc.). For it makes no sense to think of some *asserting* with absolutely no communicative intention.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the requirement here that what I do or say be *intelligible* is crucial: to say that there is no *audience* for my work just *is* to say that it does not communicate. So that one cannot really distinguish a commitment to meaning or communication from a commitment to intention.

However, these represent two kinds of misfires. For something might be learned which (while not real or genuine communication)<sup>14</sup> is nevertheless *there* (I really *am* bored at the meeting, and my boss finds out); equally, what is *intended* may not be realised (I *mean* to make a dance masterpiece, but ...). So, (first) determining what is *intended* and what is *communicated* amounts to one determination; and (second) the recognition of *failures* of artistic achievement might be localised (for particular artworks in particular contexts) as amounting to *either* failures of intention *or* failures of communication: thus, as explicable in terms of this contrast.

While no set of conditions would be sufficient to guarantee that such-and-such *was* an artwork, it is possible to reject the art-status (or artistic claims) of some works if they fail these key tests: positively, the thought is that useful generalisations would invoke (among other criteria) the meaning-bearing dimension of artworks. As often, the point is most readily seen by considering the *negative* case: so one importance of this meaning-bearing (or communicative) dimension is that it permits the rejection of certain works as failing this communicative intention (however conceived). Thus I will dismiss, as not bearing on meaning, (purely) accidental features — except where the decision to use them is clear (as with aleatory composition: Cage, Cunningham, etc.). That is, “intentional” here is not equivalent to “intended”, in the sense in which prior planning or thinking-through might be implied. Rather, action (say, walking) *is* intentional unless ... where some “recognised head of exception” fills the blank. So that actions will always be intentional unless ...; and a context of art-making and art-understanding means that the implications of these too will be intentional.<sup>15</sup>

Now, we might ask whether the “research” done by artists could be knowledge-generating in the way in which, say, (successful) academic work is. Suppose I learn about, say, the limitations of my (antique) physiology by — for instance — experimentation: I try to do things

---

<sup>13</sup> We should of course recognise the “intention implicit” in communicative acts, see Charles Travis, *The Uses of Sense* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 17-35.

<sup>14</sup> Best, *Philosophy and Human Movement*, 140; UD 244.

<sup>15</sup> However, a complication here (as with other cases) concerns whether we should take as intentional *all* the descriptions true of the artwork — or whether there could be unintended consequences here.

and then ... well, some may prove beyond me in fatal ways (kinds of sub-aqua or sky-diving, perhaps) but even some of the activities with less risk may tell me what I can (and cannot) do. But why should anyone (else) care? Again, we might list some of those with vested interests of various sorts (my wife, my boss, the doctors I might sue for negligence, etc.) but, for all of *these*, their specific relation to *me* is both what justifies their interest and what redeems it — they are not interested in my activity divorced from their (varied) interests in *me* as a (specific) person.

As a slight digression, I will rehearse (*again*) the contrast here with F. H. Bradley's insight into the non-specific concern with art — yes, it must be *this* artwork that I am making sense of — *this particular* work (with *its* sensuous properties), and not some other — but my concern is not self-directed (or, to the degree that it is, is not a concern with *art*).<sup>16</sup>

In confronting the *generality* of art's value, Bradley enquires about the characteristics of *proper* (that is, non-misperception) treatment of beauty in the pictorial arts.<sup>17</sup> Consider, say, a painted nude: why is it beautiful and not pornographic? Well, if my interest in the painting treated it as pornography, that interest must centrally be *my* interest, based on my personal reactions to that painting: the essence of pornography is the *private* immediacy of its impact. He correctly infers, from the possibility of pornography, a general constraint on art. For, if my concern for, say, *this nude* is genuine (artistic) interest in beauty, it cannot be simply a *personal* or *private* concern. Since art is “always outside of and above and beyond any mere personal feelings” (B 261), Bradley rightly concludes that art's problems are not purely mine.<sup>18</sup> So only if these really are *life*-issues (as opposed to *my* issues) can my engagement with them be of a kind appropriate to art. But Bradley recognises his idealisation of the situation. He says:

There are times ... where at least in the case of certain persons art fails to achieve its end, and then may in consequence merely disturb and excite. ... But here assuredly, so far and to this extent, we have not to do with genuine art. (B 621)

His point, of course, is that these persons are no longer able to take an *artistic* interest in the work: rather, they will misperceive it. In treating art in a way which lets its “problems” become *purely* mine,<sup>19</sup> I am on a slippery slope to sentimentalism, or to pornography, or ... anyway,

<sup>16</sup> Note that Bradley's tool, in respect of scientific interest in the sexual, is the accusation of *misperception*.

<sup>17</sup> F. H. Bradley “On the Treatment of Sexual Detail in Literature”, in his *Collected Essays*, vol. II (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934), 618-627, cited as “B”.

<sup>18</sup> Much needs to be added about the erotic *in* art. Bradley's idea here is that an erotic “charge” might be part of the appeal of some art: but even then it would necessarily be a charge with a general appeal (with generalisable reasons, as we might say); and hence reference to the erotic is just one way of explaining the “charge” of *some* art — a way that recognises the place of the erotic in the life of humankind.

<sup>19</sup> Consideration of the idea of decadence is extremely interesting here: as an idealisation, one may see the progressive “feeding” of “baser” instincts by a declining artworld/society. This might, say, be one case where, through demonstrating that that such-and-such was a bad work of art, critics might have an untypical

away from art. Here is Bradley again, discussing our reaction to a poem of Tennyson's:

if your ideas and emotions stray beyond the vision of Fatima's passionate heart and burning flesh, if they begin to wander and turn to a mere something in yourself — it is because you have lost hold of the poetry. The beauty which transported you beyond your private being, and which held and purified your individual feelings, has vanished. (B 622-623)

So art viewed as art cannot find a response in purely personal concerns. If we ask "Why not?", Bradley again offers the right answer in a clear fashion. With art: "We have everywhere ... the impersonal direction and set of the interest. We are absorbed not in ourselves but by an object before our minds" (B 623).

Yet what does the term "impersonal" mean in this context? Since my appreciation of an artwork must not depend on my *specific* relation to it — thereby ruling out, of course, my economic interest in it (say) — whatever reason I have for my appreciation must be generalisable. But the artwork obviously has some hold on *our* attention, for otherwise why should *we* attend to it? So the term "impersonal" amounts to "human": that is, about humankind, not just about me.

Is taking an artwork as pornography *definitely* misperception (rather than, say, another legitimate way of perceiving the object)? Yes, because it cannot sustain the (relative) *universality* of artistic interest ... so it would be focusing, at best, on *my* issues, rather than on *life*-issues. To see it that way is not to see an *artwork*.

## II.

The point of that detour was to highlight a connection of artistic appreciation (and artistic value) to the *possibility* of (at least) *some* audience for art wider than me personally. Once acknowledged, this conclusion has a number of implications for dance-understanding and communication: I will treat three of them, dealing fairly quickly with two.

The first concerns the implication for the *specifics* of an audience: of course, levels of knowledge and sensitivity are required for any artistic appreciation (I must have the relevant concepts, and be able to mobilise them in my appreciation of the work at issue — and such concepts may draw on the history and traditions of the artform, etc.). But, since the relevant interest *in art* is more general, no more specific audience can be addressed. Schoenberg famously said: "if it is art, it is not for all, and if it is for all, then it is not art."<sup>20</sup> Yet, if art is not "for everyone", this is only because some may lack the relevant understanding, while others

---

"something" which was art despite its pornographic aspects — where those aspects were not sufficient to rule it out as art, but were clearly an aesthetic flaw: but the possibility of such examples should not be seen cumulatively.

<sup>20</sup> Arnold Schoenberg, *Style and Idea* (Berkeley, CA: California University Press, 1975), 124.

cannot mobilise that understanding in their appreciation — but both of these are mere practical difficulties, akin to not having learned to subtract . . . . So no *specific* audience can be required.<sup>21</sup>

A second implication may be drawn out by returning to the idea of research by artists (say, by choreographers). If the “research” from the artist isn’t knowledge-generating (in principle), it will be hard to see how there is anything to communicate. So, for instance, suppose I draw a series of studies of, for example, *hands* as a prelude to painting the hands in one of my masterpieces: now, exactly what has been learned, and who has learned it? The answer to the second question is easier: *I* have learned it — indeed, on most readings,<sup>22</sup> there is no implication here that *you* do not already know whatever it is that *I* learn (which is why the same explorations, with the same or similar results, are undertaken by generations of art students). But can the “it” I learn be usefully put in some other way? (What have I *learned* that I did not know?) Many writers — with justice — doubt that such “information” can be presented propositionally.<sup>23</sup>

In the dance example, they might urge that only *dance*, and only *this* dance, offers me this (precise) insight. So one cannot (even) say what *I* have learned. For, if I could, I would (therefore) be able to “express” the insight detached from the dance itself (especially from the sensuous properties of the dance). But then those sensuous properties would seem irrelevant. No, what I learn is not (completely) expressible in some other form.

Yet, again, why should anyone (else) *care* what I have learned? Now, this would be a *silly* question if what I had learned was readily communicable (in principle) in some non-dance form: but, if that were so, the benefit would lie in the “what” that was learned. But then the dance itself would be of *lesser* importance — important only as a vehicle! We should be glad to find this view mistaken. Equally, if the “what” is only communicable through the dance, it is distinctly odd — indeed, nothing more than a verbal point — to insist that I (alone) know

<sup>21</sup> As I put it in “Context, audience and understanding”, read at a conference of Dutch Society for Analytic Aesthetics, Utrecht, February 2000: “an artwork that requires of its audience, say, understanding the values of, say, *Victorian women* cannot thereby require that the audience be composed of Victorian women.”

<sup>22</sup> A sophisticated reading might take what *I* have learned to be uniquely instantiated in what *I* do — but that begs the question.

<sup>23</sup> One part of the problem relates to the term “information”. There is a connection here to Wittgenstein’s remarks (*Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1953, cited as “PI”) on “information” (PI §356: “. . . isn’t it a misleading metaphor to say: ‘My eyes give me the information that there is a chair over there?’”): what exactly does this mean in the context of, for instance, some perceptual judgement? How can one’s perceptions of, say, a table count as offering *information* (in the simplest or favoured cases)? There, I simply *see* whatever it is: the process is direct. Of course, if there is some *doubt* that what is before me *is* a table, I might begin by what seems uncontentious: “Well, at the least, it looks to me, here, now, like a brown patch . . .” But is that really *information*? For why is this less contentious (that is, *always* less contentious) than, say, my saying that I see a table — for *I might* come to dispute either, given my coming to accept other “facts” about how the world is arranged. Perhaps, when I grant that the “patch” was dried blood, I might modify my claim as to how it *looks* (here, now). So that might not provide a “sub-strate”.

or understand it: on the contrary, very many people can (in principle) understand the dance — whether or not any actually do — and *what* is understood is a perfectly public phenomenon; namely, the dance.

What would it *be* for the importance of dance to reside in what it offered to dancers (or, worse, to choreographers)? The kind of self-absorbed judgement this might amount to would be a rejection of the *value* of dance (as of the other arts) because it would preclude, in principle, access to that value for any but its dancers,<sup>24</sup> and that is to deny the *necessary* “publicity” (in principle) of value<sup>25</sup> — of course, lack of certain knowledge and understanding may render defunct one’s judgement of certain objects; but (as we saw) this is merely a ‘practical elitism’ (UD 159-160) — only those with certain knowledge can understand, say, propositions of nuclear physics and, even though not *necessarily* beyond others, the time taken to acquire *this* knowledge and understanding (in typical cases) will preclude one *also* learning (for instance) advanced evolutionary biology, etc.

So a key part of the importance, for me, of dance’s art-status is that it is *because* a certain dance is an artwork that it has the (real vs. sociological “meaning”, significance, association, UD 86; 114; 294-297) meaning that it has. But failing to regard it as art would militate against just that meaning. If successful, such a line of argument would make dance no more revealing than, say, gymnastic floorwork or ice-dance — aesthetically-compelling sports or physical activities, but not art.

### III.

I turn now to a third implication of the audience for art (which will take up much of the rest of this paper): namely, that what I encounter in artistic appreciation are *features* or *properties* of the work. But, if so, the *possibility* of these features or properties will depend on the powers and capacities of creatures (us!) suitable to recognise them. Further, they will include meaning-properties and value-properties: is that plausible? I will urge that it is.

It is sometimes claimed that what I see, in seeing a dance, or what I understand, in understanding one, is an *interpretation* of that dance. Although mistaken, this view can be revealing.<sup>26</sup> For using the term “interpretation” here suggests (at least to me) something detached (or at least detachable) from the artwork. And we have seen that such a conception

---

<sup>24</sup> Surely the point is that only those presently involved count ... so just being a dancer (at other times/places) would not be sufficient, even if you had actually danced this dance.

<sup>25</sup> NB again the parallel with secondary qualities: you may not be able to see them, but they must be “see-able”.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. McFee, “Technicality, Philosophy and Dance-Study”, 159-165.

of artistic meaning should be rejected.<sup>27</sup> For it is only when one sees a meaning-bearing object, in this sense, that one sees an artwork. So we cannot detach the meaning from the artwork (and still be left with an artwork).

Notice, here, three key features: first, I do not typically take *my* view of a dance or a piece of music to be an *interpretation* of the piece (or to reflect such an interpretation): rather, (for me) my view is just an acknowledgement of the *features of the work* — that is how I see it! Relatedly, I will describe my view (literal and otherwise) of an artwork as an *interpretation* of that work *only* when I (explicitly) recognise other views — and recognise that they (too?) are answerable to the work’s perceptible features. And this is *more* than just my recognising that artworks may (typically) be viewed differently. For (and second) a key part of the “seeing” (etc.) here involves seeing (or trying/aiming to see) the *artistic* features/properties of the object — seeing it as an artwork: that is, as (say) a sculpture and not (just) a block of marble. We might bring out the point with a three-fold contrast between:

- (a) the artistic properties of the sculpture;
- (b) the “designed” properties of some polished stone; and
- (c) the “natural” features of a meteorite.

If what we say of the object is *all* compatible with its being naturally occurring (the meteorite), then none of *those* features are its artistically-relevant features: certainly, they cannot be *intended* or *meant* — hence, cannot be involved in what (earlier) I called “genuine communication”. And if, for instance, I were to *mistake* a meteorite for a Henry Moore sculpture — suppose they are indistinguishable, if you like<sup>28</sup> — I would then be claiming that the wholly *natural* properties of the meteorite should be seen as intended, meaningful, etc. (I will see *design* where there is none.) And these comments will say what is *false* of the meteorite: such concepts cannot *possibly* have application in this case. Treating it as an artwork will involve mis-ascribing artistic concepts to it. But even if the features are designed (as in the polished rock), that they are the features of *this particular* rock, and that the designing was by *this particular* individual (or group), will operate differently from the features of our sculpture. Here again, treating it as an artwork would involve mis-ascribing artistic concepts to it. So different things will be true of each (even when we cannot tell them apart purely visually).<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> I take this to be Wittgenstein’s point in denying the usefulness of the term “interpretation” or “metaphor” to the “fat Tuesday” case (PI, 216).

<sup>28</sup> This case is from Ian Ground, *Art or Bunk?* (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1989), 25-26.

<sup>29</sup> Or suppose I confuse a work of decoration, such as some wallpaper, with a decorative artwork (with the Matisse *Red Interior*, say) which is clearly fine art. Here the object, the wallpaper, is both *designed* and designed *with beauty* (or something similar) in mind. Here too, as in the text, treating it as an artwork will involve mis-ascribing artistic concepts to it.

In a similar way, a graceful action might simply be my walking, or part of my gymnastic floorwork, or part of my dance: but these are not equivalent actions — that it is dance (when it is) *transforms* or transfigures that action. The point, of course, is the connection between the art-status of the work and the properties ascribed to it — someone (see UD 84-85) who said that all art objects were *essentially* interpreted could just be making that point. But this is a pretty weak or trivial sense of the term “interpretation”.

The real issue for us here concerns what features the (so-called) “interpretation” ascribes to the work: they must be *artistic* features (since it is an artwork) — so that there are other features which, while they might truly be ascribable, will be either artistically irrelevant (because relating to, say, the material condition of the work) or even false of the artwork: the dancer is light (UD 219) — despite weighing so-and-so pounds! Further, such features will reflect how I see the work: for instance, what I value in it.

As the third aspect, I argue that the features or properties of artworks can *change* over time, especially the work’s meaning-related features; and that change can amount to *no more* than a change in how the work in question is appropriately viewed so not as a result of, say, discolouration.<sup>30</sup> But, again, this is only badly described as a change in *interpretation* — better to say (as above) that the properties of the work change. And such properties come about when, say, the artwork becomes recognised as a precursor of such-and-such, for example, Kafka,<sup>31</sup> and therefore amenable to “analysis” using concepts drawn from the understanding of so-and-so (Kafka).

Here what I have called (UD 100-101) “critic’s interpretation” intersects with my “performer’s interpretation” — a performer’s interpretation can subtly alter the features of the work (that is, of that performance-token). Pollini’s interpretation (a performer’s interpretation) of, say, Schoenberg’s *opus 19* “changes” some of that work’s features by, as it were, stressing some at the expense of others. So key features of the work can be changed as a result of one (performer’s) interpretation being endorsed — especially if it becomes “the” way to play that piece; as certain acting performances are taken, for a time, as *definitive* (UD 94). But, moreover, the changes in the work’s properties (especially the meaning-properties) which result from later artistic activities may change what the work is *like*: that is, (literally) what it resembles ... for they may suggest different comparisons.

In a sense, then, we are acknowledging some of the *contours* of the idea of artistic meaning, or of what is understood when one understands an artwork such as a dance or a piece of

---

<sup>30</sup> See Graham McFee “The Historical Character of Art: a Re-Appraisal”, *British Journal of Aesthetics* 32 (1992), 307–319 and “Back to the Future: a Reply to Sharpe”, *British Journal of Aesthetics* 35 (1995), 278–283; UD 84-85; 298-301.

<sup>31</sup> The example comes from Jorge Luis Borges: see his *Fictions*, trans. A. Kerrigan (New York: Grove Press, 1962), 236.

music.<sup>32</sup> noting how *features* of, say, the dance (or what is *true* of it) are not independent of the nature of our concerns with it, where these characteristically include value-concerns. And so these contours of artistic meaning suggest ways of connecting artistic meaning — with its appeal to value — to more general questions of the relevance of art (when or where it occurs). If the art-object did not bear on what *humans* valued, then (by definition?) humans couldn't find it valuable. So, while there is no *specific* content required here for art-status it does not have to be “about” beauty, truth or God, for instance, although there may be some negative ones — pornographic concerns may be excluded, say — there is *some* content,<sup>33</sup> given the possibility of human valuing. Thus the upshot is to place artistic meaning in two fairly specific contexts: first, one provided by human valuing as it is manifest in human responses to objects or situations; second, a context offering conceptual transformation (UD 168-170) — as when Jesus transformed the concept of *adultery* (one of Wisdom's favourite cases) by getting his listeners to treat as adultery even looking lustfully *in one's heart* at another's wife. This is a transformation of what we see when we look at a certain scene: to use an example from Ian Ground,<sup>34</sup> when the flaired jeans one had admired cease (for you) to *look* “cool”. This connects to the parallel between artistic value and secondary qualities such as colour as articulated by McDowell<sup>35</sup> and, arguably, Wittgenstein: that both secondary qualities and artistic value are *seen* or *recognised*; and such recognition is central to there *being* either.

As Thomas Reid points out,<sup>36</sup> the kind of commonsense reflected in ordinary language *does* take, say, the colours of objects to be features of those objects. So, rather than being a difficulty to be met here, this aspect of both colour-properties and value-properties just seems a fact to be acknowledged. And that, in turn, points to a powerful duality within such properties. Thus, as Reid notes: “This excellence [of an air in music] is not in me; it is in the music. But the pleasure it gives is not in the music; it is in me.”<sup>37</sup> For clearly the property (or whatever) that we ascribe requires *both* the characteristics of the object and the powers and capacities of the audience. The correct way to characterise the issue, therefore, is as concerning the nature of such properties. And notice how such properties — applied to artworks, such as dances — *guarantee* their own audience: for, without the audience, we might reasonably claim no property! The emphasis here is not on *perception* as such, which generates all the problems

<sup>32</sup> I discuss this case in “Wittgenstein and the Arts: Performing and Understanding” in P. Lewis, ed., *Wittgenstein and the Arts* (Aldershot: Ashgate, forthcoming), and in “Wittgenstein, Performing Art and Action” in M. Turvey & R. Allen, eds., *Wittgenstein, Theory and the Arts* (London: Routledge, 2001), 92-116.

<sup>33</sup> Ian Ground has argued against this idea, in conversation: its rejection is implicit in his view of art as operating *procedurally* or regulatively (Ground, *Art or Bunk?*, 9; 30n).

<sup>34</sup> In a paper read to an Anglo-French Aesthetics Conference, Oxford, April 2000.

<sup>35</sup> See John McDowell, *Mind, Value and Reality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

<sup>36</sup> Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, 1815 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1969).

<sup>37</sup> Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, 754.

about perceptual *modes* for literature,<sup>38</sup> but on *recognition*; and in particular the recognition of value.

Notice that this will import directly a variety of points about perception since we see the artistic value (etc.) in terms of a specific perceptual modality (or set of them). And, without this direct perceptual confrontation, we are not approaching the artwork — as cases where we deny that so-and-so is making artistic judgements of such-and-such a work *because* he/she has not seen it. So, while we may need to both see and hear dances — say, if they essentially involve music — *these and just these* are the requisite modalities.<sup>39</sup>

#### IV.

Thus far I have tried — as it were, positively — first, to show the sense in which *artistic* meaning is the only distinctive sort that could apply to dance. Of course, dance could have *associations* or *social significance*, as any human activity might: so that, say, a *social significance* of Picasso's *Guernica* might include its being designed for *that* wall, of *that* pavilion; and then the government that had commissioned it falling to Franco's fascists before the painting's exhibition — where none of these elements bears on, say, how it looks (and hence on whether or not it is a great artwork). So these are *not* the work's meaning-features. Moreover, and second, to show how artistic meaning imports reference to an *audience*, both by highlighting that the concerns of art cannot be mine alone and because what is meant must be accessible (in principle) to understanding. Now, though, I will turn briefly to two misconceptions which, where they flourish, lead to the mistaken view that dance might have other understanding-related roles: for example, as a research tool for choreographers. As I see it, mentalistic conceptions of both action and meaning (language) are at work here; and both are mistaken as Wittgenstein has shown us.<sup>40</sup>

To go quickly: on the misconceived view, action should always be seen as motivated via a belief and a desire, taken as prior mental events or states. Now, of course, one can *sometimes* explain one's actions (after the fact) by referring to one's beliefs and/or desires — but,

<sup>38</sup> One difficult case (for any *general* thesis here: see UD 130-131) is literature: and there are, in effect, two difficulties here — or two ways of identifying the difficulty. First, there is no perceptual verb for literature (see T. J. Diffey, "The Perception of Literature", in T. J. Diffey, *The Republic of Art and Other Essays*, New York: Peter Lang, 1991, 125-126): rather, we (typically) *read* literature. Second, that reading might be rooted in one's own seeing, or in touch (reading Braille); but one can also confront literature through another's reading the text — I am thinking here of poems and novels (dramas amount to another issue).

<sup>39</sup> Re. considering dances on video, see Graham McFee, "Cognitivism and the Experience of Dance", in A. Sukla, ed., *Art and Experience* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 121-143, esp. 133-138.

<sup>40</sup> As Rosalind Hursthouse (*On Virtue Ethics*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999, 16] puts it, there is often: "the unconscious assumption that everyone shares the view that, for example, beliefs and desires are natural kinds, or that a reason is a belief/desire pair that causes an action ... To anyone sympathetic to the writings of the later Wittgenstein, ... rejections of clear-cut distinctions in philosophical psychology are as natural and necessary as breathing. Such philosophers are in the minority at the moment." [my order].

Wittgenstein notes, first, one does not always do this; and, second, even when one can/does, this does not (necessarily) describe one's mental states or activities *prior* to the action. Instead, we should recognise ourselves as *agents*: as Wittgenstein was fond of quoting,<sup>41</sup> "in the beginning was the deed" (OC §402; CV §161; PO, 395). This leaves us free to offer explanations of behaviour *after the fact*, but removes any requirement that there (necessarily) be some mentalistic explanation of what one *did* in order to perform that action: rather, one simply *did* the action.

But if this is the right account of motivation, talk of dancer's *intentions* or *beliefs* or *desires* here — if they are "read" in the mistaken way — will have no explanatory value. Yet just these beliefs, desires, etc., are what are taken to be the outcome of the dancer's (enlarged) understanding. Hence we cannot consistently see our dancers' actions as flowing from their "researches" in any useful or meaningful way.

A similar misconception dogs the view of meaning (or language) here; and, again, Wittgenstein's ideas provide the backbone of the reply. Wittgenstein is often thought, mistakenly, to have argued that language must be public (that words, etc. must have public, shared meanings) since, without this, communication would be impossible.<sup>42</sup> Instead, Wittgenstein's position is that a degree of "shared-ness" (in principle) is required if I am to use words (or sentences, etc.) *about my own case*. Thus (at PI §257)<sup>43</sup> Wittgenstein is happy to grant that a child might come by the *words* by magic; and is only concerned about what then follows from the child using them as (and us calling them) *words*; namely, that they are "stationed" at "posts" with connections to previous uses. And, of course, it follows that (in principle) I or anyone else who understands these previous uses could be taught this new one.

Such a conception of understanding works against those mentalistic views on which what *I* mean or understand is logically detachable from what *you* mean or understand. On such a view, difficulties of understanding another would face a *logical* bar: I cannot know what you are thinking or feeling. Were this picture right, other modes of attempting to deliver what you are thinking or feeling might *seem* (at first blush) a Good Thing. So then dance might look like an alternative — a better option — than, say, explanation in words. But, of course, these "other modes" fall foul of *exactly* the same problem: if, as a matter of logic, I cannot really know what

---

<sup>41</sup> L. Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969), cited as "OC"; *Culture and Value* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), cited as "CV"; *Philosophical Occasions* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1993), cited as "PO".

<sup>42</sup> Not only is this *not* Wittgenstein's position, but it would not constitute an argument here, since many opponents of this view — sceptics — begin from acceptance of just this impossibility of genuine communication.

<sup>43</sup> The relevant part of the text is: "When one says 'He gave a name to his sensation' one forgets that a great deal of stage-setting in the language is presupposed if the mere act of naming is to make sense. And when we speak of someone's having given a name to pain, what is presupposed is the existence of the grammar of the word 'pain'; it shews the post where the new word is stationed."

you think or feel, then these other methods are as doomed as the first one. Contrariwise, if the new (dance-based) methods have the logical *possibility* of success (if I could learn from them even *something* of what you are thinking and feeling), then there is not after all a *logical bar* to my knowing these things, but only familiar practical difficulties about who I know, and how well, and so on.

Wittgenstein's argument offers us a concrete reason to *reject* the picture of meaning (and the mind) just sketched; and hence to embrace the *possibility* of knowing what others think and feel. But, once we do that, there remains an obligation (first) on us to do our best to *actually* understand (and be understood by) the other — if we take it to be worthwhile; and (second) on the other to make this as plain as he or she can for us. And these seem like logical (as well as moral) obligations on both sides — at least, for artist and audience.

Moreover, we can make these obligations increasingly concrete (if still abstract), in terms introduced earlier. For my part, as audience, I should prepare myself by acquiring the battery of concepts and categories (the *cognitive stock*: MID 134) relevant for your dancework. This might involve my learning about the history and traditions of dance-making and dance-understanding in the relevant forms, which might be done both theoretically (by going to dance history classes, say) and practically — by watching and discussing dances. Further, I should endeavour to learn to *mobilise* that cognitive stock in my appreciation of danceworks: again, experience of watching and discussing dances might help here — although, of course, there is no *guarantee* for my so learning to mobilise these concepts (and hence for my being able to understand your danceworks). We might summarise by saying that I attempt to become part of the *audience* for your work, a *competent judge* in respect of it.<sup>44</sup>

Your part seems equally straightforward, described in the abstract: you must make dances that I *can* understand! And, of course, that does not mean that no *work* is required on my part (we have already sketched such work) nor that all of it relate specifically to *this* dance;<sup>45</sup> but simply that you do what you *can* to make the dance accessible to *its* audience, without compromising your “integrity” — we have already noted that, since it is an artwork (*ex hypothesi*), it *has* an audience. So you *might* think some elaborate programme notes helped; or classes in which you described and illustrated the structural relations between aspects of your dance. Or, again, you might think that the dance was so clear in itself, and its relation to the past of dance so transparent (therefore, I will not miss it), that no such strategies were necessary. You might even be right: although I would be willing to bet a *small* sum that chatting to the audience about your *past* work might still be helpful (in setting-up appropriate expectations, perhaps) — and that getting them to see the work *again* might also be beneficial.

---

<sup>44</sup> See McFee, “Wittgenstein, performing art and action”; also Travis, *The Uses of Sense*, 47 ff.

<sup>45</sup> For instance, an audience for painting which still had not assimilated, say, the advances of Cubism would be unlikely to be much use for contemporary art.

Indeed, these are just the sorts of devices we might expect more generally to aid understanding; and hence to develop an audience for future work.

*Conclusion*

My target, throughout, has been a certain conception of the *meaning, importance and value* of danceworks — and, in particular, that conception as it applies to *meaning*. I have urged the crucial character here of *artistic meaning*, discussing aspects of its relation to an audience, while highlighting how confrontation with artworks might be revelatory for that audience. (A fuller discussion would say a lot more about such revelation.)

I have been arguing, in effect, that art-status builds-in certain constraints concerning intelligibility. But it is crucial here — especially if we think for a moment about the *making* of dances — to recognise that this was a *logical or in principle* requirement: it says nothing about the extent, or otherwise, of the audience in question. This, in turn, is important in two respects: first, in terms of creativity or development, there is no suggestion here that an *established* audience is required (there may or may not be such an audience). In particular, there is no requirement for the *repetition* of previous intelligibility (again this may or may not occur) — although the presence of dance techniques, and their inter-relations (for example, the way Cunningham technique grows from Graham), will tend to strengthen the explicit connection to the past of dance. Second, and relatedly, artworks may need to “create the taste” by which they are then valued. So that my choreography may be thought *safe* if I draw extensively on the forms etc. of the past, or *radical but intelligible* if I challenge the past aesthetic in clear ways, or *powerfully challenging* if, say, a whole genre is contested. These represent some of the ways of making intelligible danceworks, works that can have (or acquire) an audience. Hence these are ways of making art. Yet they also highlight a way of *failing* to make art; namely, by lacking an audience. Of course, I may wait for the judgement — that is, the audience — of posterity: and/or I can work to create the taste that gives my work an audience — the kind of PR job by which, say, T. S. Eliot’s critical writings developed critical categories, and a critical sensibility, that was then applied to his own poetry. But I cannot rest content that just *I* understand it (unless that is a coded way of waiting for posterity). For if the work is not art in anybody’s eyes—if it permanently lacks an audience—then it is not art. In this case, too, it lacks meaning (of the kind discussed here). And that is a salutary possibility.<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup> A version of this paper was read at a colloquium at the Dance department, University of California, Riverside, on 2nd of November 2000. My thanks to those who, through their participation, improved this version.