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## Art, Historicism and Knowledge

### Introduction

Anita Silvers has recently defined two different approaches to the role of history in understanding and evaluating art. Silvers calls these revisionism and traditionalism, respectively, and defines them as follows:

*Revisionism* is the view that in valuing art it is essential to understand (some) historical events which occurred *after* the work was made. *Traditionalism* is the view that it is only essential to understand historical events which occurred before or during the work's creation. *Revisionism* entails that aesthetically relevant features of any work are partly a product of what happened after the work itself was produced, whereas *traditionalism* insists that the most subsequent history can effect is to induce us to view the work's original features in a new light.<sup>1</sup>

We could add a third, if somewhat unfashionable, alternative: the view that all reference to historical events is inessential to the understanding and valuation of a work of art. This could perhaps be dubbed *absolutism*, and it comes in different versions. One is, of course, a traditional idealist or aestheticist position: the idea that the work of art is seen *sub specie aeternitatis*, as a world in itself. There is also an empiricist version of the argument which claims that a work of art should be apprehended as a

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<sup>1</sup> Silvers 1991, p. 212.

purely phenomenal or aesthetic object. Both versions of absolutism imply that historical knowledge would only distract us from the business of attending to the work itself.<sup>1</sup>

The controversy concerns remarks like the following, which reflect the fact that the understanding of a work of art may change over time<sup>2</sup>:

“This novel means more, and different things, to us today than it meant to its original readers.”

“The qualities of this symphony seem now to be entirely different in view of later developments in music.”

“This painter’s early work is now not so original or fresh as it used to be.”

“These compositions have lately acquired an unparalleled influence, which they didn’t initially possess.”

Examples are not difficult to dig up; for example, Byzantine and primitive art, as well as the paintings by El Greco, cannot possibly look the same to us after abstraction and expressionism.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Velasquez’s portrait of Pope Innocent X Pamphili might look very different to us after we have seen the painting of the “screaming Pope”, i.e., Francis Bacon’s study of it. In his essay “The Precursors of Kafka”, Jorge Luis Borges notes that we can find a Kafkaesque quality in some earlier writers’ work. He writes:

Kafka’s idiosyncrasy, in greater or less degree, is present in each of these writings, but if Kafka had not written we would not perceive it; that is to say, it would not exist. The poem “Fears and Scruples” by Robert Browning is like a prophecy of Kafka’s stories, but our reading of Kafka refines and changes our reading of the poem perceptibly ... the fact is that each

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<sup>1</sup> Parenthetically, it is interesting to note that the battle-lines in this controversy are roughly the same as in the age-old one about the status of artistic intention, i.e., whether and to what extent an artist has control over the meaning of his work.

<sup>2</sup> The examples are from Levinson 1988, p. 56.

<sup>3</sup> The examples about primitive and byzantine art and El Greco are from Tilghman 1984, p. 76.

writer creates his precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, sometimes one claims that the correct understanding of a work of art requires concepts not available to the artist at the time of the work's creation. For example, the contemporaries of Bach and Händel could not possibly see or hear them as the culmination of the High Baroque.<sup>2</sup> We, on the other hand, cannot avoid doing so.

Thus, the question at stake in this historicist controversy is whether later events can alter of extant works, or whether we just become able to grasp something that was there to begin with. For example, Correggio anticipated Carracci and this might influence our perception of his work. This fact about Correggio's work, however, is something nobody in Parma in 1525 could not have perceived.<sup>3</sup> Is this altered view of Correggio then a change in the aesthetic features of the work, as revisionism would have it? Or is it something we, as observers, bring into our perception of the work, something that was always there but that we can only grasp from a certain epistemic or historical viewpoint, which is the view of traditionalism? It is easy to see that traditionalism in this sense is philosophically linked to some sort of metaphysical realism, while revisionism leans towards relativism or constructivism. Well, enough "isms". Let us begin by considering another area of philosophy where a similar controversy exists, namely the philosophy of science.

In recent epistemology there has been a revival of relativist and skeptical accounts of knowledge, mainly influenced by certain interpretations of T.S. Kuhn's philosophy of science. Doubts about reference and about traditional realist or empiricist theories of knowledge have encouraged subjectivist or relativist philosophical tendencies, which take up the idea of incommensurable paradigms or "conceptual schemes". In his study on historicism Robert D'Amico notes that what is commonly termed historicism is a version of these sentiments. Modern

<sup>1</sup> Borges 1970, p. 236. This passage is cited both by Tilghman 1984, p. 76 and McFee 1992, p. 307.

<sup>2</sup> This is an example from the discussion between McFee and Levinson. See McFee 1992, pp. 312-313; Levinson 1988, p. 78-79.

<sup>3</sup> Danto 1991, p. 207.

historicism suggests that there is no ultimate reference or “court of appeals” by which the diverse worlds or paradigms can be reconciled or judged.<sup>1</sup>

## Traditionalism

Post-Kuhnian philosophy of science has thus been dominated by different versions of what could be called “revisionist”, i.e., anti-realist views. Interestingly, however, Kuhn’s position on art seems to be much more traditionalist than his famous view on science. In his comment on the relation between science and art Kuhn notes that his views on scientific change might have made science seem more like art, since he has treated such topics as the role of competing schools and of incommensurable traditions, of changing standards of value, and of altered modes of perception. “Topics like these”, Kuhn writes, “have long been basic for the art historian but are minimally represented in writings on the history of science”. However, he warns us against drawing too hasty conclusions: “If careful analysis makes art and science seem so implausibly alike, that may be due less to their intrinsic similarity than to the failure of the tools we use for close scrutiny.”<sup>2</sup>

Kuhn wants, then, to distinguish between science and art with respect to their position vis-à-vis tradition and change, and reiterates a common view of the historical character of art. He writes:

Though contemporaries address them with an altered sensibility, the past products of artistic activity are still vital parts of the artistic scene. Picasso’s success has not relegated Rembrandt to the storage vaults of art museums. Masterpieces from the near and distant past still play a vital role in the formation of public taste and in the initiation of many artists to their craft. In science new breakthroughs do initiate the removal of suddenly outdated books and journals from their ac-

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<sup>1</sup> D’Amico 1989, p. 119. Historicism in this sense must be kept separate from Popper’s quite idiosyncratic use of the term. However, I do not have the opportunity to consider Popper’s views here (see Popper 1957).

<sup>2</sup> Kuhn 1969, p. 404.

tive position in a science library to the desuetude of a general depository... Unlike art, science destroys its past.<sup>1</sup>

Interestingly, in his urge to differentiate between art and science, Kuhn here seems to be oblivious to his own views on perception and description, i.e., his ideas about paradigm shifts and changes in world views which he associates with scientific revolutions. Instead, he seems to assimilate works of art to those “mid-sized dry objects” that philosophers used to be so fond of; that is, he is thinking of visual arts, objects like paintings and sculptures, which do, indeed, have a physical stability over time and are concretely present to us in a way scientific theories or observations cannot be. Ideally, a painting by Rembrandt hanging in the museum is (with the help of appropriate methods of conservation and restoration) “perceptually indiscernible” from what it looked like when produced by Rembrandt or his disciples in his atelier. Of course, when we go to historically more remote art, e.g. that of the Greeks, this assumption is more questionable, even if it is still quite common.

These views represent what Silvers calls “traditionalism”, i.e., the idea that the works of art remain the same through history, “even if we address them through altered sensibility”, or, as Jerrold Levinson puts it, that “it is not *artworks* which change over time, it is rather *us*.”<sup>2</sup> This clearly catches one side of our attitude towards works of art: the commonsensical view that the works themselves, or their meaning, does not change, even if we might discover new things about them. Thus the masterpieces of our tradition, having passed the test of time, would testify about some eternal, unchanging kernel of meaning.

To the traditionalist the notion of an origin of the artwork serves as a benchmark for objectivity or at least constrains interpretations of it, Silvers notes. “This notion [of the origin] is used to *explain why* the work was made; accordingly, once an artworks origin is identified, it can serve as a standard to deter attributions of properties which are incompatible with this origin.”<sup>3</sup> History, in this view, functions as a foundation, and the work’s origin as a way to anchor its meaning. For example Levinson claims that if one abandons this view then “one

<sup>1</sup> Kuhn 1969, p. 407.

<sup>2</sup> Levinson 1988, p. 57.

<sup>3</sup> Silvers 1991, p. 222.

could never feel even reasonably confident of having understood any artwork, of having grasped its content”.<sup>1</sup> The motivation for this objectivist position thus seems to be a fear for what is seen as the unbridled relativism of the revisionist view, and the consequence that there would be no real knowledge about works of art, only opinion or whim.

## Revisionism

From a postmodern and antifoundationalist perspective it is, of course, easy to ridicule such a notion of “original meaning” and “unchanging works” and the analyst’s obsession with the identity of a work of art. What is more commonly called historicism is the view that art and knowledge are historically constituted and therefore changing. Instead of anchoring meaning, history would show us that no meanings are unchanging. We noted earlier that historicism is connected to various relativist and skeptical views in contemporary epistemology. Similarly much contemporary critical and aesthetic theory is characterized by a skepticism about the possibility of knowledge about art and the view that there are no grounds at all in aesthetic or critical discourse. This can also mean that the very concept of art is considered merely a linguistic convention.

A good example of a revisionist view is given by is Terry Eagleton, who uses Marx as an example of traditionalism. In his introduction to the *Grundrisse* Marx poses what has been called the “Greek problem”. Why, he wonders, should ancient Greek art have an “eternal charm” even though the conditions which produced it have long passed. Eagleton, commenting on Marx’s conundrum, asks the following counter-question: “But how do we know that [Greek art] will remain ‘eternally’ charming, since history has not yet ended?”<sup>2</sup> Implicit in Marx’ statement of the problem is, according to Eagleton, the idea of some unchanging nature, some canonical interpretation or identity that makes works survive “the test of time”. Marx was probably a child of

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<sup>1</sup> Levinson 1988, p. 84.

<sup>2</sup> Eagleton 1983, p. 12.

his times, and saw Greek art in terms of *edle Einfalt und stille Größe*.<sup>1</sup> For all we know, Greek sculpture was originally painted with garish colours and perhaps placed in a way that made the original perception of those objects quite different from our own. So if we did find an improbably well preserved specimen of Greek sculpture, we would perhaps not know what to make of it. It might seem alien to us, since that kind of art has not been appropriated by our tradition.

Eagleton gives another example: he exhorts us to imagine that by dint of some deft archaeological research we discovered a great deal more about what ancient Greek tragedy actually meant to its original audience, recognized that these concerns were utterly remote from our own, and began to read the plays again in the light of this deepened knowledge. One result might be that we stopped enjoying them. We might come to see that we had enjoyed them previously because we were unwittingly reading them in the light of our own preoccupations; once this became less possible, the drama might cease to speak at all significantly to us.<sup>2</sup>

Eagleton goes on to propound a thoroughgoing constructivism. "The so called 'literary canon'", he says, or "the unquestioned 'great tradition' of the 'national literature' has to be recognized as a construct, fashioned by particular people for particular reasons at a particular time" (all these key terms – literary canon; great tradition; national literature – are, of course, to be put within rather contemptuous inverted commas or placed "under an invisible crossing-out mark", since they are, according to Eagleton, inherently ideological). He goes on:

There is no such thing as a literary work or tradition which is valuable in itself...it is thus quite possible that given a deep enough transformation of our history, we may in the future produce a society which is unable to get anything at all out of Shakespeare. His works might simply feel desperately alien..."Our" Homer is not identical with the Homer of the

<sup>1</sup> In fact Marx' own explanation of the charm of Greek art is that the Greeks (culturally) represent a "normal childhood" (if compared with most other ancient peoples), and that "the historical childhood of humanity" has an eternal charm. Greek art is thus irrevocably connected to the conditions that produced it, but the charm it has for us does not conflict with this fact.

<sup>2</sup> Eagleton 1983, p. 12.

Middle Ages, nor “our” Shakespeare with that of his contemporaries; it is rather that different historical periods have construed a “different” Homer and Shakespeare for their own purposes, and found in these texts elements to value or devalue, though not necessarily the same ones. All literary works...are “rewritten”, if only unconsciously, by the societies which read them.<sup>1</sup>

Building upon such considerations, the revisionist argument goes as follows: the original historical context of a work of art is just one context among many, and historical developments create new contexts and new meanings, which shows that there are no natural or “given” meanings.

These ideas have found an expression in certain poststructuralist or deconstructionist accounts of artistic and literary understanding. These considerations are at play especially in ideas of the “death of the author” and the “disappearance of the subject”, as well as in different versions of reader-response criticism: the meaning (if any) of texts, utterances and actions must be explained with reference to their context, and not to their origin (or subject).

Jonathan Culler, in his influential account of deconstruction, uses an example from Wittgenstein to illustrate this contextualist thesis. Wittgenstein writes:

Can I say “bububu” and mean “If it doesn’t rain I shall go for a walk”? It is only in language that I can mean something by something.<sup>2</sup>

In its own context Wittgenstein’s remark is best understood as part of an argument against traditional theories on meaning and reference, and a preamble to the so called argument against private language. Meanings are not anything an individual speaker can make up himself or that are made up in the act of using a sound. Culler claims that the remark supports the poststructuralist argument that all linguistic or textual meaning (and hence all meaning) is essentially context-dependent; and since contexts are in constant change, or subject to new descriptions, the meaning of a text cannot be exactly reproduced or recovered in a faithful reading.

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<sup>1</sup> Eagleton 1983, pp. 11-12.

<sup>2</sup> Wittgenstein 1958, p. 18.



This is the background of Culler's often quoted claim that "meaning is contextbound, but context is boundless"<sup>1</sup>. By this he means that any given context is open to further description, and that there is no limit in principle to what might be shown to be relevant to the performance of a particular speech act. Culler claims that "Wittgenstein's suggestion that one cannot say 'bububu' and mean 'if it doesn't rain I'll go for a walk' has paradoxically made possible just that".<sup>2</sup> The idea is that there is no privileged "original context", and thus no "pure meaning" or "presence" that can be grounded by recourse to the origin of the utterance or the intention of the speaker. Analogously, the "original" historical context of a work of art, as far as one can give any meaning to the idea of originality, would be just one context among other, equally possible contexts or descriptions. Thus the historical origin of a work of art cannot be used to ground the meaning or constrict possible interpretations of the text or work of art.

Culler's contextualist dictum is supposed to be an argument against any stability of meaning (his main target here is speech act theory), but it rests on two false presuppositions. Culler is, as Richard Shusterman notes, in fact captivated by the very view of meaning that Wittgenstein was criticizing, since Culler "construes reading, understanding and interpretation as the recovery or reproduction of an identical semantic object, 'a content of meaning'". This "is a terribly perverse but pervasive philosophical picture which has long captivated and misguided our theorizing"<sup>3</sup>. In fact, as Shusterman points out, in deconstruction "this protean vision of language is then coupled with a naively pre-Wittgensteinian picture of understanding as the reproduction or recapturing of a particular intentional content or meaning-object so as to render true reading and understanding a hopeless pursuit."<sup>4</sup>

According to the "received view" on meaning, criticized by Wittgenstein, meaning is seen as an autonomous and independent object or "content" rather than something essentially relational, the exis-

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<sup>1</sup> Culler 1982, p. 123.

<sup>2</sup> Culler 1982, p. 124.

<sup>3</sup> Shusterman 1988, p. 405.

<sup>4</sup> Shusterman 1988, p. 404.

tence of which cannot be disentangled from human social and linguistic practices. Shusterman points out that this view is also at the very core of the objectivist or traditionalist views of art.

Thus, despite their apparently enormous difference and opposition, both deconstruction and the more conservative objectivist or cognitivist theories of interpretation are united by a more fundamental shared view of meaning (as an object) and of interpretive understanding (as its mirroring reproduction or faithful discursive presentation).<sup>1</sup>

The second point Culler is missing is that even though language is constantly changing and developing, this change does not always have to jeopardize understanding. We must remember that much of this change is hardly significant and occurs against a dominant background of some sort of continuity, as Shusterman observes.<sup>2</sup> Something similar is the case for artistic meaning, even though I do not want to equate the two, and the traditionalist view is trying to catch this aspect of it. Silvers points out that there is a certain intuition on the side of the traditionalist view, since in being susceptible to reevaluation, all art is not alike.

In particular, the reputations of precisely those works we think of as canonical appear to have stabilized to the extent that they are stubbornly resistant to change. It seems notably easier to agree that cultural evolution or revolution could result in positive reevaluation of previously undervalued objects than to conceive of the reputation of canonical works plummeting like a panicked stock market.<sup>3</sup>

This shows neither that all works have some fixed and immutable meaning nor that all artistic properties are like (linguistic) meaning. However, we should be careful in accepting such wholesale claims of changing contexts as the one that Culler and other radical constructivists are presupposing. Surely it is not possible to legislate a priori against the Humean skepticism that, for example, Eagleton is propounding. However, the *possibility* of this skepticism should not have us make too hasty conclusions. It is true that the “eternal charm” of

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<sup>1</sup> Shusterman 1988, p. 405.

<sup>2</sup> Shusterman 1988, pp. 404-405.

<sup>3</sup> Silvers 1991, p. 216.

Greek art or Shakespeare might be without any objective foundation, i.e., not grounded in an unchanging kernel of meaning, and that, in fact, this eternal charm is dependent on our concept of the classical and is thus to some extent ideological, as Eagleton claims. This does not, however, warrant the conclusion that all our present categories must be viewed with suspicion, or that such traditional notions are somehow distorting.<sup>1</sup> The alternatives are not immutable grounds or unbridled relativism. Both Wittgensteinian and hermeneutic philosophy remind us of a possibility to escape this dichotomy. In a comment on Gadamer, Richard Bernstein writes:

The varieties of relativism constantly flirt with the suggestion that what we take to be real, or true, or right is arbitrary, as if we could somehow simply decide by an act of will what is real true and right. But historicity is not to be confused with arbitrariness. Gadamer reminds us that we belong to tradition, history and language before they belong to us ... We become fools of history if we think that by an act of will we can escape the prejudgments, practices and traditions that are constitutive of what we are, and that in Rorty's phrase have been "hammered out" in the course of history. But we are always in the process of modifying and shaping what we are becoming.<sup>2</sup>

## Narrativism

Let us consider the question from another angle. Arthur Danto has developed a revisionist argument that partly builds upon his narrativistic view of history.<sup>3</sup> Danto phrases the contrast between traditionalism and revisionism as one about description and perception:

I used the concept of narrative sentences in my work on history: these are descriptions of events in relationship to later

<sup>1</sup> Cf. McFee 1992, p. 317.

<sup>2</sup> Bernstein 1983, p. 167.

<sup>3</sup> Danto's narrativistic position is developed in *Narration and Knowledge* (Danto 1985) (earlier published as *Analytic Philosophy of History*). Danto has subsequently used similar historiographical arguments in his philosophy of art, though he has tended to take a more Hegelian view of the history of art (see, e.g., Danto 1986, ch. 5).

events which I presumed observers of the early event could not know about: like Correggio anticipating Carracci. This true, art historical sentence is not one under which a patron in Parma in 1525 could have perceived a work of Correggio, but [*sic*] because the future is hidden. Suppose, though, I could travel back in time to Parma *circa* 1525: I would perceive the Correggio in the light – “in terms of”... – my knowledge of subsequent art-history. Would this knowledge penetrate what I perceived? Or would it only be my knowledge about what I and a native Parmesan of 1525 saw in common that was different? Do we see different things, or the same thing under different descriptions – but the descriptions themselves are as it were external to what I see?<sup>1</sup>

Danto’s own answer to this question seems to be that the descriptions we see things under are somehow internal to what we see, i.e., our knowledge of subsequent events would change the properties of Correggio’s work. But his view is a bit more complex than this. His conclusion builds upon what has been called “the aesthetics of indiscernibles”<sup>2</sup>, the idea being that even though we see perceptually indiscernible objects, they have different ontological identities. According to Danto, we perceive material objects, but under certain interpretations or descriptions. One of the descriptions under which we would see Correggio is in terms of his anticipating Carracci.

Danto’s method does, however, rest on certain problematic presuppositions. It is not possible for me to criticize them in any detail here, so I will just state them.<sup>3</sup> One is dualism, the idea that there are material objects behind artworks, which have a different kind of existence. These material objects can, according to Danto, be described in what he calls “theory-neutral” terms, while works of art must be interpreted. Thus, Danto claims, even a pigeon could perceive the uninterpreted material object, the painting by Correggio, but it could not see it

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<sup>1</sup> Danto 1991, p. 207.

<sup>2</sup> This is Garry Hagberg’s way of putting it in the title of his Wittgensteinian critique of Danto (Hagberg 1991).

<sup>3</sup> These arguments are developed more fully in Hagberg 1991.

as art, which includes seeing it in the light of its influence upon Carracci.<sup>1</sup>

However, this distinction between perception and description is philosophically untenable since it presupposes a level of basic "brute facts", the perception of which would come first, followed by a descriptive interpretation.<sup>2</sup> Instead, if we really accept the significance of the context as a determinant of meaning we must deny the intelligibility of this fundamentally misleading distinction between description and perception.<sup>3</sup> We should for instance see, that "material object" is not a neutral level, but just another description that demands a very special context to be intelligible. Noticing this does not, of course, solve the conflict between traditionalism and revisionism. It is hard to see what could, since nothing hinges upon this question; it is metaphysical in the bad sense of the word. It is the philosophical issue of what one "really sees" that gets this puzzle started, and this question has, one could say, the gait of a false issue.

Danto's view is in fact just another version of the atomism and search for foundations that lies behind traditional theories of meaning and perception. We cannot have the innocence of the eye, but neither is there any uninterpreted level of material object that we put our conceptual or interpretive scheme over. This does not, however, mean that we have to abandon the insights of narrativism, since they are not dependent upon Danto's ontological commitments. In fact, narrativism can show us one way out from this particular fly-bottle, since it straddles the distinction between traditionalism and revisionism in an interesting way.

What, then, can be salvaged of these arguments? The distinction between description and perception, between knowing and seeing, must be abandoned. Describing a work of art correctly means understanding and perceiving it correctly. But what kind of criteria can we have here (since this kind of description is not arbitrary)? (This is the same kind of problem that occurs both in historical understanding and understanding human beings.) One criterion goes back to Wittgen-

<sup>1</sup> Danto 1991, pp. 210-215.

<sup>2</sup> Hagberg 1991, p. 225.

<sup>3</sup> Hagberg 1991, p. 228.

stein's insistence on the contextuality of meaning: to understand an utterance we must be able to place it in a proper context. This can equally well be applied to art: we always come armed with a context when perceiving a work of art. The question, what the role of this context is and how it comes into play cannot be answered beforehand, but is dependent on the situation.

It is difficult to deny the importance of the immediate historical and social context for the proper understanding of a work of art, and most often Wittgenstein's dictum is understood as an exhortation to look at the work's original context, the place it had in the practices of that particular culture and historical period. Thus we can often get a less distorted view of what the work was about, what the artist was trying to achieve, etc. This is certainly true when it comes to works of art from distant historical periods and foreign cultures. However, the original context should not be understood as a ground for the meaning of the work, or a guarantee of objectivity. We should instead abandon this naive version of historicism, which implies a search for the true interpretation or the original meaning of works of art.

The interesting thing is that even when insisting on the contextuality of art we have to consider at least two important functions of context. It is true that the original context is important but this should not make us oblivious to the another context, which could be called the narrative context, i.e., subsequent history, tradition, and canons. The narratives we tell about a work of art also determine its relation to other works and its place within a tradition. This is part of a historical process and can never be determined solely by recourse to the work's original meaning for its original audience and maker.

The tension comes from the fact that placing a work in this other context of what the hermeneuticians call "effective history", also in a way *de*-contextualizes the work, since it lifts it out from its original circumstances and connects it with subsequent historical events. Thus we understand the work partly "through our own concerns" and in relation to our own tradition and our present practices. We should, of course, be aware of this even if we cannot escape it; it is naive to think that we can somehow recreate the original meaning of a work of art,

but it is equally naive to think that knowledge of its origins have no importance at all.

This is especially clear when we talk about the canonical or "classical" works of our tradition, and is nicely brought out by Gadamer:

[the classical is] that which speaks in such a way that it is not a statement about what is past, a mere testimony to something that still needs to be interpreted, but says something to the present as if it were said specifically to it. What we call "classical" does not first require the overcoming of historical distance, for in its own constant communication it does overcome it. The classical, then, is certainly "timeless", but this timelessness is a mode of historical being.<sup>1</sup>

Gadamer's notion of the classical entails the idea that some works speak to us more "immediately" than others. This is because they have been appropriated by a tradition that we belong to. It is not impossible that some deft archaeological research could dig up information that would completely change what we know of Greek art; however, it is very difficult to imagine what kind of information could cause a complete obliteration of our possibility to enjoy it. And all this new information could anyway not change the way Greek art has been received and the enormous influence it has had upon the development of Western art.

So even though the incorporation of a work of art in the canon might be considered arbitrary in the sense that it does not rest upon facts but is the result of opinion, this does not make the canon or tradition itself arbitrary.<sup>2</sup> Thus we cannot, for example, detach the renaissance, Winckelmann and all other subsequent history from our understanding of Greek art and go back to a "pure" original and unadulterated meaning or experience of the works. (Here one could perhaps appropriate the poststructuralist tag of "traces" that attach to and are left by such seminal works.) This does not mean that getting more knowledge about ancient Greek art might not alter our perception of it.

However, as we noted above, there is much art that lacks this aspect of immediateness. When we consider art that has *not* been ap-

<sup>1</sup> Gadamer 1975, p. 257.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Frank Kermode on the impossibility of disentangling knowledge from opinion in canon formation (Kermode 1985, ch.3).

propriated by our own tradition, background knowledge about its original context can make a very crucial difference, and indeed be necessary for us to be able to appreciate or see what there is to see. The same is true for much modern art, since it is more gratuitous, ironic and seemingly self sufficient than traditional art. It demands sympathetic attention, and also demands more specific background knowledge than traditional art. Robert Hughes observes, that

before 1880, the idea that every work of art contains and talks to its own history, and that this conversation is part of its meaning, was taken more or less for granted as the *background* to aesthetic experience. With modernism it moved to the *foreground*, influencing most ideas of what was, and was not, artistically advanced. The more private art became, the more this was so.<sup>1</sup>

So the role of such background knowledge and different contexts is very resistant to summarization and must be determined on a case by case basis. The rule of thumb that can be given is that such information is important if it makes a difference to how we perceive the work of art. And this is not anything that can be determined beforehand. We will return to this question in a moment.

It was precisely the timeless aspect of classical works of art that perplexed Kuhn. It is, however, clear that no work can attain such a classical or canonical status independently of its ability to inspire enduring aesthetic admiration, and this is something no one can know at the point of its origin. If we appropriate the slogan about “meaning being use” for these purposes, we can say that a work of art cannot be canonical if it is not “used” in one way or another within the practices of art: as a model, when making comparisons, etc. (In short, it functions somewhat as a Kuhnian paradigm or exemplar functions in science.) And a tradition is at least partly constituted by what can be called the story of art, or the narratives that place a particular work in certain relations to other works of art.

Artistic revolutions change our view of the tradition, and also entail new narratives, which bring out new relations, thereby also affecting the value of the works involved. In this sense, as Silvers puts it, “the

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<sup>1</sup> Hughes 1991, p. 375 (italics added).



story of art is the test of time”, and from a narrative point of view traditionalism and revisionism can be construed as viewpoints from which different parts of the story of art are told. Silvers notes that

for purposes of artwriting narrative time privileges different temporal perspectives differently. Events cast prior to or contemporaneous with the creation of the subject or protagonist of a narrative history are privileged because they constrain what can plausibly take place during the rest of the story. Events subsequent to the subjects creation become the rest of the story and it is their unfolding which makes the story make a difference.<sup>1</sup>

Thus a narrative can make clear how a new work “fits” past works, but also how past works can be seen as precursors of newer ones. (We could parenthetically note that T.S. Eliot’s views of tradition and canons are somewhat similar.)<sup>2</sup> In this way a narrative can make us look at the thing in a certain way, and bring out relevant features; the narrative “creates” a canon that fits the present case, or extricates the features that can be applied across the range of canonical works.<sup>3</sup> The point is that this also gives new reasons for judgments, which entails a new way of seeing the work of art in question.

Thus the “test of time” has to do with the narratives we tell about works, how we make works of art fit into these constructed canons. This also has the interesting consequence that “the valuative process by which art becomes canonical is best understood as being a product of art; art which endures does so in virtue of being subject of powerfully authorizing stories” Silvers claims. And this is consistent “with the view that art is autonomous in the sense that it grounds itself.”<sup>4</sup>

This brings us to the idea of art being autonomous in relation to history, i.e., the old and fairly discredited idea which I at the beginning of the paper termed absolutism. Can any sense be made of it, if we

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<sup>1</sup> Silvers 1991, p. 221.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., “Tradition and the Individual Talent” in Eliot 1976.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Danto’s idea about “style matrices” in Danto 1964.

<sup>4</sup> Silvers 1991, p. 223.

now stop to pick up the bits and pieces of what is left of traditionalism and revisionism?

## Absolutism

The “absolutist” view seems to catch the aspect of timelessness and immediacy of works of art better than either traditionalism or revisionism; absolutism is the traditional notion that we often regard works of art as unique, as objects *sui generis*, that we look at and value for their own sake, not to extract knowledge or some “object of meaning” from them (this is also one of the reasons why it is misleading to speak about “aesthetic knowledge”). This position wants to dissociate the valuation of art from art history; the claim is that history just distracts us from the business of enjoying works of art for their own sake. So, according to this view, for instance originality or influence could not be part of what we are interested in when we are interested in the object itself. This is, of course, a central tenet of much classical aesthetics, especially German idealism, but a similar view can also be found in phenomenological aesthetics and analytic aesthetics in its phenomenalist mode (Beardsley). This idea of works of art as completely autonomous aesthetic objects is easily coupled with ideas about the aesthetic attitude or the aesthetic consciousness and the “innocence of the eye”. This attitude would be required to achieve the aesthetic experience in which the work of art is apprehended as an aesthetic object. Gadamer sees Schiller’s aesthetics as a authoritative formulation of this view, which he describes as follows:

By disregarding everything in which a work is rooted (its original context of life, and the religious or secular function which gave it its significance), it becomes visible as the “pure work of art”... The aesthetic experience is supposed to be directed towards the work proper – what it ignores are its extra-aesthetic elements, such as purpose, function, the meaning of its content. [The aesthetic consciousness] distinguishes the aesthetic quality of a work of art from all elements of content

which induce us to take up an attitude towards it, moral or religious, and presents it solely by itself in its aesthetic being.<sup>1</sup>

Regarding something as an autonomous aesthetic object would mean seeing it *sub specie aeternitatis*, or from the point of view of eternity. This would imply seeing it outside any context, outside the stream of life and history, as Schopenhauer, another major proponent of this view, would have it.<sup>2</sup>

It is interesting to note that Wittgenstein seems to have flirted with such an absolutist view in his early philosophy, under the influence of Schopenhauer,<sup>3</sup> even if Wittgenstein's thinking on art is perhaps most naturally associated with some version of what has above been called revisionism. What is usually emphasized are the antifoundationalist views of his later philosophy, for example his insistence on the historicity and contextuality of art and art appreciation. Take for example his often quoted remark:

The words we call expressions of aesthetic judgement play a very complicated role, but a very definite role, in what we call a culture of a period. To describe their use or to describe what you mean by a cultured taste, you have to describe a culture. What we now call a cultured taste perhaps didn't exist in the Middle Ages. An entirely different game is played in different ages.<sup>4</sup>

This sounds like the same kind of constructivism that Eagleton was propounding, and seems to place Wittgenstein squarely in the revisionist camp. However, in his recent book on Wittgenstein Ben Tilghman has tried to reconcile these two traits in Wittgenstein's thinking about aesthetics. Let us first have a closer look at what the issue is about.

It must be noted, that notwithstanding its philosophical problems, the idea of an aesthetic attitude and of regarding a work of art as a world in itself seems to have an intuitive validity, since it clearly catches something about *why* art can be important to us. But it should

<sup>1</sup> Gadamer 1975, p. 76-77.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, § 36, § 41.

<sup>3</sup> Wittgenstein develops this idea especially in his early notebooks (see Wittgenstein 1961a, p. 83) but also in the *Tractatus* (see Wittgenstein 1961b, sec. 6.45.) For more details, see Tilghman 1991, esp. ch. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Wittgenstein 1966, p. 8.

also be clear that if we want to make any sense of this position it has to be disentangled from the various idealistic or empiricistic philosophies that have tried to formulate it.

For example, in the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein writes: "The thing seen *sub specie aeternitatis* is the thing seen together with the whole logical space" (6.45). One aspect of regarding something *sub specie aeternitatis* can be understood to mean that the work "forces us to see it in the right perspective"; but what is that perspective? Well, it is a perspective in which the features of a work of art are seen as somehow necessary and the work itself as complete.<sup>1</sup> The problem is, that it is impossible to think of an Archimedean point which would offer such a viewpoint. This again leads to the question of what it is to look and see, or what the appearance of a work of art is, and here Wittgenstein's later thoughts on perception and description can help us.

We can note that the absolutist ideal of aesthetic perception as somehow pure and contextless rests upon an impoverished view of perception. Looking must be understood as a skill rather than an event.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, seeing something *sub specie aeternitatis* is a certain kind of skill; we cannot be forced into such a perspective if we do not master the technique, i.e., have the competence, to regard an object in a certain way. Thus regarding something from the viewpoint of eternity, or as an autonomous object "with the world as background", does not imply seeing it outside any context whatsoever. It is not "a view from nowhere". Instead, it is seeing it in a special way, which means that it, too, is dependent on competence and background knowledge.

For example the New Critics seem to have thought that what is perceivable in a work, that is, the appearance of the object, can be thought of as given independently of an audience's capacity to apprehend it.<sup>3</sup> Clearly this is not so. Instead, what counts as the appearance of a work of art is always "something relative to a background of compe-

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<sup>1</sup> See, eg., Wittgenstein 1980, p. 4, 52 and 57. Cf. Wittgenstein 1966, pp. 12-14, 32-36.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Ground 1989, p. 46.

<sup>3</sup> I have in mind e.g. the distinction between "intrinsic" and "extrinsic" approaches to literature in Wellek and Warren 1968, as well as Beardsley's account of the aesthetic object in Beardsley 1980. Cf. Ground 1989, p. 51.

tence, a background with many different levels often intermingling in complicated ways".<sup>1</sup> It is only against such a background that it is meaningful to speak about the features of a work of art as "necessary" and the work of art as "complete". Tilghman notes that

it is only given this background of practices with its conventions and attendant expectations that [the relations of features in a work of art] can appear to us as necessary, and that "necessary" strikes us as an appropriate description.<sup>2</sup>

We might need, for example, knowledge of what the artist was trying to achieve, what techniques and methods were available to him, what the artistic and appreciative conventions, practices and problems of his age were, etc.

In fact, one could say that this background consists of a whole culture, as Wittgenstein does. However, there are limits on the relevance of background knowledge and competence. As Ian Ground observes, the point of having the relevant knowledge, of knowing something about the history, theories, etc, that make up this background, is not to enable us to construct theories about special sorts of objects. It is to enable us to see them in a certain way, which can be termed regarding them *sub specie aeternitatis*, if we wish to retain that phrase.<sup>3</sup> Aesthetics is not reducible to cultural anthropology or history.

Thus the aspect of eternity is still in some sense bound to the nonreductive understanding of the work "as it is" or "in itself". However, it would be a mistake to think that this is some sort of pure perception of the real aesthetic object. In connection to this, Tilghman notes that we often have a tendency to think about aesthetics as some sort of "natural history" of works of art:

there is a tendency to suppose that aesthetic inquiry and criticism involve doing something akin to investigating the natural history of the work of art: we are inclined to suppose that it is primarily a matter of uncovering the qualities and characteristics of an object that stands before us as the naturalist describes the characteristics of the forest's flora and fauna.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ground 1989, p. 82.

<sup>2</sup> Tilghman 1991, p. 72.

<sup>3</sup> Ground 1989, p. 94 (see also pp. 51-52). Cf. Haller 1984, pp. 34-35.

<sup>4</sup> Tilghman 1991, p. 82.

By contrast we should emphasize the importance of being able to talk about artistic meaning and intentions by placing the individual work in some larger context of artistic endeavour in general, and “that is done by placing things side by side. These comparisons are possible and effective because the vocabulary of intention and meaning has a use only against a background of conventions and practices.”<sup>1</sup>

This has been called a perceptualist view of critical reasoning<sup>2</sup>, and it builds upon the fact that what we see is partly determined by the connections we can make. Some of these connections are of necessity historical, and in this sense “every work creates its own tradition”. This tradition is sketched out by a narrative that creates or clarifies particular connections. But this also means that the narrative creates a certain point of view: it gives certain reasons for aesthetic judgments, and thus it is an invitation to see the work in a certain way, which means that we might see things we did not notice before. The further, philosophical question, whether they were there to begin with, or whether they would be there even if nobody never noticed them, is meaningless.<sup>3</sup>

This kind of view gives neither the objectivistic security of traditionalism nor the relativistic freedom of revisionism. But if we say that history neither fixes a work’s identity nor shows that no such identity exists, where does this inconclusiveness leave the question of the identity of a work of art?

## Conclusions

We can conclude by trying to give the sketch of an answer by returning to Kuhn’s philosophy of science. Kuhn has in fact applied to the history of science the same kind of historiographic view of the part played by narratives and traditions that I have tried to sketch out here, even if he

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<sup>1</sup> Tilghman 1991, p. 82.

<sup>2</sup> See Shusterman 1978. McFee argues similarly that having different reasons for judgements or interpretations amounts to having different judgements, and that since these reasons are historically changing, so are the judgements and thus the meanings of works of art. McFee p. 309-310.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. McFee 1992, p. 318.

wants to stress the differences between science and art. Kuhn has given up the ontological theory of truth, and he notes that "the notion of a match between the ontology of a theory and its 'real' counterpart in nature seems to me illusive in principle".<sup>1</sup> Thus theories, terms, and observations have a meaning and identity only within a certain paradigm. This does not make them arbitrary or false.

Similarly in art, one could say that a work of art has an identity, only insofar as it is part of a tradition. One could even say that some sort of adherence to a tradition is a necessary price to pay for aesthetic judgment: there are criteria which are relevant to determine the aesthetic value of a work of art, and although they are indecisive, their relevance cannot be altogether denied if we want to take aesthetic judgment seriously (as Cavell has noted)<sup>2</sup>. This reminds of the role played by tradition and authority in Wittgenstein's work; indeed he suggests that one "must recognize certain authorities in order to make judgments at all".<sup>3</sup> But this is not merely an outburst of cultural or aesthetic conservatism; it is rather a conceptual point which is also well taken by Kuhn in his account of the scientific community.

Kuhn's idea that science destroys its past while art doesn't was caused by his insistence on that every scientific paradigm rewrites its own history and reconstitutes its own tradition. But as we have seen, something of the same is true in art. So we could say that neither science nor art destroys its past, but this past is reappropriated for present concerns and practices in keeping with a certain tradition. However, the past is not "given" and fixed; it is alive insofar as it has a use, and it is ordered through the narratives we tell, i.e., constituted by the way we use it and our attitude towards it.<sup>4</sup> In science as well as in art, every major work creates its own precursors, and thus modifies our view of the past, as it will modify the future.

<sup>1</sup> Kuhn 1970, p. 206.

<sup>2</sup> See "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy" in Cavell 1976.

<sup>3</sup> Wittgenstein 1969, § 493. Cf. J.C. Nyíri 1988, p. 28.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. McFee, who notes that "paradoxically, accepting that art has a historical character justifies a certain kind of ahistorical judgement; what we *presently* say about art works is true of them. And it must be, because we are in the flow of history. But nothing is unalterably fixed: any aspect of taste could be changed (though not all at once)." (McFee 1992, p. 317).

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