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DISCERNING HUMANITY IN A WORK OF ART*

The earliest writings of Wittgenstein that are available to us, apart from some letters and dictated notes, date from 1914. Among these is the first remark in *Culture and Value*, which reads, 'We tend to take the speech of a Chinese for inarticulate gurgling. Someone who understands Chinese will recognize *language* in what he hears. Similarly I often cannot discern the *humanity* in a man'. I once wrote a paper raising an analogous question about art: What is it to discern the *art* in a work of art?¹ I think it is time now to take the question one step farther and ask: What is it to discern the *humanity* in a work of art?

Discerning the humanity in men, that is, understanding other people, is simply an integral part of our life; understanding art is, of course, not something built into our life in the same way, but is, we might say, parasitic upon those more fundamental capacities and relations. Whatever difficulties there are in discernment are practical ones and we must reject any philosophical account that understands them as theoretical. These practical difficulties can be as varied as the strangeness of cultural difference, racial and ethnic prejudice, or merely insufficient information about a person and his circumstances. Likewise there are analogous factors and circumstances that can stand in the way of understanding works of art.

Historically the human has entered the visual arts through representation and this permits us to see obvious parallels between understanding people and understanding the human in art. Any typical renaissance painting of the Crucifixion will illustrate this. We have no difficulty in seeing what is going on in the picture, what the people are doing, what their emotional reactions are, and so on. (For someone from a non-western, non-Christian, culture it may be quite another matter, but that is a problem that

* This paper is an earlier version of Chapter 7 in *Wittgenstein, Ethics and Aesthetics* (Macmillan Press Ltd, London, 1991.)

¹'Understanding Art and Understanding People,' Proceedings of the 8th International Wittgenstein Symposium (Vienna: Holder-Pichler, Tempsky, 1984).

can arise anywhere). There is no more problem of discernment here than there would be were we to encounter on our morning stroll at the bottom of the lane (God forbid!) a real crucifixion. There is a point, however, in which art and life are not parallel. The artist is continually up against the problem of presenting his scenes and his figures in a way that makes clear who they are and what they are doing such that their humanity is apparent. People going about their daily business do not generally *present* themselves in this way; they do not go about as if they were actors presenting themselves as going about their business. People do not have to work at making their own humanity manifest. This observation serves to shift the question a bit from what it is to discern the humanity in a work of art to how it is that art can make humanity discernible.

Since the renaissance painting has sought to make humanity discernible through the development of geometrical perspective which created a space in which human figures can be shown in the fullness of their actions and relations to one another. The modern move into abstraction has, of course, given up concern for this kind of space and consequently introduced the danger of giving up the traditional concern for the human. I want now to discuss one tale about abstract art and its relation to artistic tradition that tends to make this danger real.

It can and has been argued that abstract art, to say nothing of Dada and conceptual art, constitutes a radical rupture with the artistic tradition developed since the renaissance and now must be thought of as a somewhat of its own particular stripe that can neither be described nor judged in traditional terms. The champions and defenders of the modernist move into abstraction have nevertheless argued that there is indeed a continuity between twentieth century art and the art of past centuries. This defense can be traced to the thesis common to both Roger Fry and Clive Bell that the modernist emphasis on purely formal values should be understood as an uncovering and exploitation of essential materials that were there in the arts all along, albeit submerged under the emphasis on representation. This allowed the characteristics of the new movement in art to be summarized as '*the re-establishment of purely aesthetic criteria in place of the criterion of conformity to appearance the rediscovery of the principles of structural design and harmony*' [my emphases].²

Clement Greenberg has enlarged this thesis in an interesting way. Greenberg understands the development of the modernist movement in general as a *critique* after the Kantian fashion. The essence of modernism, he believes, lies 'in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the dis-

²Roger Fry, 'Art and Life', in *Vision and Design* (New York: Meridian Books, 1956), p. 12. The collection was originally published in 1920.

cipline itself - not in order to subvert it, but to entrench it more firmly in the areas of its competence.³ Greenberg believes that each art has to discover its own values and these values turn out to be what is unique to its medium. In this way art comes to provide a kind of experience valuable in its own right and not to be obtained from any other kind of activity. Painting's area of competence, and hence its value, is the production of painted surfaces which present themselves simply as what they are, painted surfaces. The history of modernist painting is the history of the sloughing off of whatever is not essential to the medium. It is largely the history of the repression of space (but not necessarily the abandonment of the figure) in favor of flatness. Manet is thus seen as the first modernist painter and Jackson Pollock's 'all over' paintings in which each part of the surface is of equal importance represents the maturation of the trend that begins with Manet.

A very interesting, and tempting, variation on this thesis has been played by Suzi Gablik⁴ who seeks to reanimate the often scorned notion of progress in art by arguing that abstract art is really a progressive development of the artistic tradition. She says that

What we are pointing to is a trend in art away from iconic modes of representation and towards the development of formal logical systems dealing with sets of pure abstract relations. Viewed in this way, the history of art can be seen as a process which has entailed the slow and laborious liberation of forms from their content.

She goes on to present the gist of the argument in this way:

What makes modern art 'progressive', then, is its capacity for doing infinite things with limited means. Modern art (like generative grammar) works by transformations. The square, circle, cube, rectangle and triangle form a natural grammatical unit, a 'kernel sentence' out of which all combinations become possible. Whereas *iconic* systems depend on a *figurative* correspondence between picture and model -- between the object and the symbol used to represent it -- the symbols in more complex symbol systems convey information that varies in meaning according to the context and lend themselves, in the manner of language, to increasingly high levels of abstraction⁵.

³'Modernist Painting', *Art and Literature* (Spring 1965), pp. 193-201.

⁴*Progress in Art* (New York Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1977. p.45.

⁵Op cit. p.46.

The analogy that is put to work here asks us to understand paintings as like formal logical systems. The difference between traditional painting and modern painting is then presumably like the difference between an interpreted formal system and an uninterpreted one. The further analogy with generative grammar really adds nothing.

The analogy goes wrong in more than one way. In the first place, it won't do to describe a figure in a representational painting as a *symbol* of the object it represents. It is surely wrong to say that the typical renaissance figure of Christ on the cross is only a *symbol* of Christ as if the relation between the painted figure and Christ is like the relation between the gridiron and St. Lawrence whose symbol it is. The picture is a picture of Christ himself; when describing the painting we say that it *is* Christ. (Nor is the picture of the gridiron only a symbol of that instrument.)

Secondly, the complimentary notion of symbol systems conveying *information* is both lame and out of place. The analogy is lame in that the notation of a formal system conveys no information until the system is interpreted. So long as the system is uninterpreted the symbols have only *syntactical* relations to one another and as yet no *semantical* content. The notion is also out of place in that it is simply a mistake to suppose that the importance of a painting must lie in the *information* that it conveys.⁶ David's painting of the coronation of Napoleon as Emperor may well convey information about that event, who was there, where they were standing, and so on, but the importance of so much painting lies not in the information that can be gleaned from it, it is rather in what it *shows* us about the world and human values.

Under the most charitable interpretation, however, the talk of conveying information may come to no more than a way of referring to painting's connection with the world, whatever that connection may prove to be. The likening of abstract painting to an uninterpreted formal system that conveys no 'information', then, amounts to the contention that abstract painting has no connection with the world and, *a fortiori*, with whatever of the human the world contains. It is clear that this way of looking at the twentieth century move to abstraction makes it impossible to discern the humanity in a work of art because there is no humanity there to be discerned. One may well wonder not only about whether this is progress, but also about those who think that it is.

Gablik, like Greenberg, sees an historical movement from

⁶ 'Information' in Gablik's usage is a quasi-technical term drawn from the theories of language and communication she sometimes appeals to. Those theories only add to philosophical confusion and in its familiar use 'information' is unhelpful in understanding painting.

renaissance space to the kind of flatness characteristic of Pollock. She finds Cubism to be a dividing line in this movement and says that 'Cubism's formidable achievement was to have opened up the way for painting and sculpture to pursue their own intrinsic concerns'⁷, concerns very similar to those Greenberg recognizes.

But this is surely not the only way for painting to get on. It was just all these techniques of space composition worked out during the renaissance and practiced in one form or another through the nineteenth century, together with all they entailed for the presentation of the human in art, that were to a large extent abandoned toward the end of the nineteenth century by the number of developing tendencies that have been summed up under the name of modernism. If modernism entails a repression of space and an exaltation of flatness, it does not have to entail the repression of the human figure. The 'language' of modernist painting can be put to work to do something other than showing off its own medium. This is very clear, for example, in that complex of movements that gets called expressionism. In the work of painters such as Munch, Kirchner, and Nolde it is still humanity that is expressed although more often than not it is the darker side of humanity. In the work of these painters the human figure tends to be abstracted, simplified, and distorted and it is by means of these distortions that its character is shown.

The renaissance was itself not at all averse to showing the darker side of human life and frequently portrayed cruelty and inhumanity, but inhumanity is itself an aspect of humanity. Deliberate cruelty presupposes a discernment of the victim's humanity for even the torturer turns his attention to the sufferer. The cruelty and inhumanity of the twentieth century, however, tends to take a different form. We can see this in a number of Kirchner's paintings, *The Street* and *Five Women in the Street*, for example, where the inhumanity shows up as cold detachment and isolation. The figures of the women in their long coats begin to turn into abstract forms. Their bodies are masked and incapable of any possible articulation of limbs that would manifest genuine human emotion and contact. There is no room in these pictures even for a torturer's horse to scratch its innocent behind upon a tree.

In certain respects early modernist painting would seem to have more in common with pre-renaissance art than it does with the later tradition. It is easy for us to see, say, much of Byzantine painting as abstract and to appreciate it for its formalist, if not its expressionist, values. It would be a mistake, however, to describe it as abstract or its forms as distorted. 'Abstract' is a term that characterizes twentieth century developments and a painting is said

⁷Op cit. p. 83.

to be abstract by contrast with the post-renaissance tradition that modernism was opposing. Likewise, it is only by contrast with that same tradition that we can speak of expressionism *distorting* the human figure. In this way we can understand the rejection, or at least partial rejection, of the tradition and abandonment of spatial articulation as in no sense either the result of a failure or inability to represent human character or a concern with the medium for its own sake, but rather is a deliberately chosen means for showing certain kinds of character.

Something remains to be said about the sticky matter of making clear what the point and sense, the human point and sense, of abstract art can be. The assumption is widely made that abstract art either is or ought to be a purely formal exercise and that its values are really only its formal values. While this is certainly true of many examples of abstract art there is no necessity that it be true of everything in that genre. It is surely not true of abstract painters such as Kandinsky and Mondrian whose art was an expression of their commitment to spiritualism and theosophy.⁸ The formalist thesis is to a large extent the result of supposing that representation is not of the essence of art and is thus artistically irrelevant. The argument from essences is best traded in for a decision to modify artistic practices.⁹ For this reason I shall put aside essences for another question: How can abstract art make contact with the world and thus have meaning and the kind of human significance we have been talking about? I want to approach this by way of an excursion through some considerations about both meaning and music.

At the beginning of his discussion of meaning in the *Philosophical Grammar* Wittgenstein asks, 'Does it make sense to point to a clump of trees and ask "Do you understand what this clump of trees says?" In normal circumstances, no; but couldn't one express a sense by an arrangement of trees? Couldn't it be a code?'¹⁰ We can imagine the spacing of the trees represents, say, the dots and dashes of Morse code. In this way almost anything could be used as a code to express a sense, even the lines and colors in an abstract painting. The elements of a code, however, merely replace the letters and

⁸For an account of the influences on these and other painters see *The Spiritual in Art*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art (New York: Abbeville Press, 1986).

⁹... if you talk about essence -, you are merely noting a convention. ... to the *depth* that we see in the essence, there correspond the *deep* need for the convention' [Wittgenstein: *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, ed. G.H. von Wright, R. Rhees and G.E.M. Anscombe; trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1956), §74]. This remark has an application to the formalist's talk of the essence of painting. The convention in question becomes the practice of abstract painting and the deep need is surely related to artists' dissatisfaction with traditional painting.

¹⁰Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Grammar*, ed. R. Rhees, trans. A. Kenny (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978) §1.

words of a natural language and are able to express a sense because they share the syntax of that language. Abstract art, of course, and as a matter of fact, is not like that. The elements of an abstract painting do not have a syntax. This is another point at which the analogy between abstract painting and formal logical systems breaks down.

A little farther on Wittgenstein compares understanding a sentence with understanding music, a comparison that is a recurring theme throughout his work.

Understanding a sentence is more akin to understanding a piece of music than one might think. Why must these bars be played just so? Why do I want to produce just this pattern of variation in loudness and tempo? I would like to say 'Because I know what it is all about.' But what is it all about? I should not be able to say. For explanation I can only translate the musical picture into a picture in another medium and let the one picture throw light on the other¹¹.

It is useful, I think, to read what Wittgenstein says in that passage along with a remark of Hanslick's that also makes the point that we cannot say what music means: 'In music there is both meaning and logical sequence, but in a musical sense; it is a language we speak and understand, but which we are unable to translate.'¹²

The question of whether music has meaning has generally been understood against some version of a referential theory of meaning. Just as a sentence presumably has meaning because the words in it refer to things in the world, so the tones and chords of music, if they are to have meaning, must refer to things in the world. Hanslick denies that the elements of music have reference to anything beyond themselves and thus denies meaning to music in that sense. Nevertheless, he wishes to speak of it as a language that expresses a purely musical sense. In this respect his view has a certain affinity with Gabelik's: it is as if Hanslick sees music as like a formal logical system only with no possibility of interpretation.

The alternatives envisioned by philosophers of music would seem to be that music is either representative of (or, to use the *Tractatus* terminology, a picture of) some part of the world, or it is a self-contained 'language' whose only content is itself. Wittgenstein rejects both of these alternatives. When he says that understanding a sentence is more akin to understanding a piece of music than one might think, he is rejecting the *Tractatus* picture theory of

¹¹Ibid, §41.

¹²Eduard Hanslick, *The Beautiful in Music*, translated by Gustav Cohen (Indianapolis and New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1957), p. 50.

meaning and along with it any purely referential theory of meaning. And in the same breath he is rejecting the view that music is only about itself. For Wittgenstein this represents a significant change in his thinking about music from the earlier position of the *Notebooks* when he said that 'A tune is a kind of tautology, it is complete in itself; it satisfies itself'¹³, and thereby put himself on the same side of the issue with Hanslick and, by analogy, Gablik.

Of course we cannot 'translate' a musical phrase in the way that we can translate a sentence in one language into a sentence in another or even rephrase, or paraphrase, a sentence to make its meaning clear. What Wittgenstein suggests that we can do, however, is to find a picture in another medium that will throw light upon the music. An example of translation of the musical picture into a picture in another medium is found in this remark from *Culture and Value*:

In Bruckner's music nothing is left of the long, slender (nordic?) face of Nestroy, Grillparzer, Haydn, etc., instead its face is completely round and full (alpine?), even purer [of a purer type] than Schubert's¹⁴.

Although we cannot say what the music is 'about', what it 'means', we can point out what it is *like*, this face, for example. The character and significance that can be seen in the face can be heard in the music too.

The obvious - and jejune - objection to this procedure is that it is at best impressionistic criticism and at worse emotional indulgence. The objection misses the mark because such comparisons need not be merely expressions of the reaction of a moment or emotional ejaculations. In Wittgenstein's case they are the product of thought and reflection and are intended to *throw light upon* the music. They give us a way to *hear* the music and to find significance in it and doubtless they can help a musician play the music with a new understanding.

This gives us a way of talking about the meaning of music and of finding human significance in it. It does, however, involve replacing certain uses of the word 'meaning', and one conception of how the word is used, with what Wittgenstein would call a secondary sense of the word.¹⁵ When we use

¹³Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Notebooks 1914-1916*, ed. G.H. von Wright and G.E.M. Anscombe (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961) p. 40.

¹⁴Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Culture and Value* ed. G. H. von Wright, transl. P. Winch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press) p. 221. See also Brian McGuinness, *Wittgenstein: A Life: Young Ludwig 1889-1921* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: The University of California Press, 1988), pp. 123-25.

¹⁵Wittgenstein introduces the notion of words having a secondary sense in *Philosophical Investigations* (2nd edn, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958) p. 216. I have explained and discussed this notion in detail in *But is it Art?* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984)

a word in a secondary sense, such as 'meaning', we take the word, as it were, from its home base where we speak of the meaning of a word and the meaning of a sentence and apply it in a new situation where its usual criteria and conditions of application are absent. Since we understand what it is to speak of the meaning of a sentence, it can strike us as apt to speak of the meaning of a musical phrase despite there being nothing analogous to making clear the parts of speech or looking up unfamiliar words in the dictionary. At least part of what contributes to theoretical problems about the meaning of music is an overly restrictive view of how a word such as 'meaning' can function in language, not to mention musical practice.

If it is assumed that abstract art cannot have meaning because the only way for a painting to have meaning is for it to be in some way referential, and that usually means representational, then what has just been said about music invites us to consider more imaginative and flexible uses of 'meaning':

Following Wittgenstein we may find the significance of abstract art revealed in its translation into 'pictures' in other media and in finding likeness to other things. Shortly after her death Wassily Kandinsky wrote an appreciation in this vein of the work of Sophie Taeuber-Arp:

Her arsenal of expressive means is of inexhaustible richness. The greatest contrasts are of 'loud' and 'soft'. The thunder of drums and trumpets in Wagner overtures are opposed by the quiet, 'monotone' fugue of Bach. Here, the thunder and lightning that rip up the sky, shake the earth; there, the sky smooth and gray, in all its vastness, and the wind has retired far into the distance. The smallest, most naked shoot remains motionless, the weather is neither warm nor cool. The language of stillness¹⁶.

Wittgenstein's 'translation' was from the music to a face; Kandinsky's is from a painting to music and then to the elements of the weather and nature, all of which have close and obvious connections with human significance and character.

In G. E. Moore's notes of Wittgenstein's lectures from 1930-33 he reports that Wittgenstein suggested that giving reasons in aesthetics is really like putting things side by side and that one can show what an artist means, what he is driving at, by making appropriate comparisons with other works of art. It is interesting to put that conception of criticism along side what he says about

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¹⁶From 'Die farbigen Reliefs von Sophie Taeuber', quoted by Harriet Watts, 'Arp, Kandinsky, and the Legacy of Jakob Böhm', in *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art (New York: Abbeville Press, 1986), p. 254.

translating from one medium to another. In Moore's account of his lectures the example was Brahms and one puts Brahms' music beside other pieces of music. Now the comparison is with something that is not music at all, the faces. This opens up an additional dimension for such comparison for it need not take place within the same 'space' at all; indeed, there are times when the only way to get at significance is to step outside that space and into an altogether different medium. Kandinsky, for one, has shown us how a painting can be likened to music or to the elements of nature. In either case the important thing is that something is shown which cannot be said.

Stephen Toulmin and Allan Janik have explained the *Tractatus* claim that ethics and aesthetics are one by suggesting that it is only through the indirect communication that art makes possible that the meaning of life can be shown. I am inclined to put it more modestly: if not the meaning of life, at least human significance. What they say allows us to find an unexpected irony in Greenberg's thesis that the experience provided by art is valuable in its own right and not to be obtained by any other kind of activity. Art does indeed, Wittgenstein would say, provide an experience not to be obtained by any other kind of activity: it shows the meaning of life.