

PHIL 4403: Philosophy of Art

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Bell, “The Aesthetic Hypothesis” and “The Metaphysical Hypothesis”

“The Aesthetic Hypothesis”

*Art: those objects that provoke the aesthetic emotion.

--But is there some property common to art (i.e., its essence) in virtue of which this emotion is provoked?

Q: Is Bell correct in making the following claim?

“For either all works of visual art have some common quality, or when we speak of ‘works of art’ we gibber.” (15)

--Bell claims that *significant form* is the essence of all (visual) art.

“What quality is shared by all objects that provoke our aesthetic emotions? What quality is common to Sta Sophia and the windows at Chartres, Mexican sculpture, a Persian bowl, Chinese carpets, Giotto’s frescoes at Padua, and the masterpieces of Poussin, Piero della Francesca, and Cezanne? Only one answer seems possible—significant form. In each, lines and colours combined in a particular way, certain forms and relations of forms, stir our aesthetic emotions. These relations and combinations of lines and colours, these aesthetically moving forms, I call ‘Significant Form’; and ‘Significant Form’ is the one quality common to all works of visual art.” (15)

This account utilizes 2 key concepts: form and aesthetic emotion.

Note that Bell is talking only about the visual arts, and his theory should be understood with this limitation in mind.

*Worry: But can’t any, or at least a great many different, objects and features provoke the aesthetic emotion?

--The critic’s job is to point the layperson to those features of artworks that produce this emotion. Until we experience this emotion, we are not justified in calling something a work of art. In this sense, Bell’s theory of art is subjective.

--Nevertheless, Bell claims that significant form is the only quality common to all objects that provoke this response.

--‘Significant form’ is to include both form and color. But is Bell correct when he writes:

“The distinction between form and colour is an unreal one; you cannot conceive a colourless line or a colourless space; neither can you conceive a formless relation of colours.” (16)

--Bell resists substituting 'beauty' for 'significant form' as he claims that many natural objects are judged to be beautiful, but do not provoke this aesthetic emotion. In general, the emotional responses to artworks and naturally beautiful objects are different.

--There are many merely descriptive paintings that do not move us aesthetically. The explanation for this is that such paintings lack significant form. "They leave untouched our aesthetic emotions because it is not their forms but the ideas or information suggested or conveyed by their forms that affect us." (17)
Example: Frith's *Paddington Station*

Bell's distinction here between descriptive works that lack aesthetic worth and genuine artworks is motivated in large part due to the rise of photography. Photography, not art (!), can better convey factual information about a culture.

Also note Bell's distinction between a painting using form as an *object of emotion*, as opposed to merely *suggesting emotions*.

--"Art is above morals, or, rather, all art is moral because, as I hope to show presently, works of art are immediate means to good. Once we have judged a thing a work of art, we have judged it ethically of the first importance and put it beyond the reach of the moralist." (18)

--Bell's theory privileges "primitive art", which eschews representation and technical niceties in favor of form alone. (18-19)

--Bell's anti-representationalism: "But if a representative form has value, it is as form, not as representation. The representative element in a work of art may or may not be harmful; always it is irrelevant." (19)
Art, like mathematics, is divorced from the concerns of the everyday world.

*What should we make of Bell's shocking claim that:

"To appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing but a sense of form and colour and a knowledge of three-dimensional space." (20)

--According to Bell, one who is truly appreciative of art becomes blind to the representational properties of the work!
"You will notice that people who cannot feel pure aesthetic emotions remember pictures by their subjects; where as people who can, as often as not, have no idea what the subject of a picture is. They have never noticed the representative element, and so when they discuss pictures they talk about the shapes of forms and the relations and quantities of colours." (20)

--Bell extends his theory to music on pp. 20-21. Though, he claims that he is ignorant of the significant form of music, so his musical appreciation is thereby

diminished. He typically ended up reading human emotions and events into the music, rather than thriving in “the superb peaks of aesthetic exaltation”. (21)

--Most people have a diminished appreciation of art. This is okay (in his words, nothing to be ashamed of!), but such people do not enjoy the best of what art has to offer.

--Because significant form is a timeless and objective property of objects, the art-status of an object is also timeless and objective.

“The Metaphysical Hypothesis”

*Significant form “moves us so profoundly because it expresses the emotion of its creator.” (158) The artist's feelings are conveyed through the lines and colors that she produces.

--Importantly, this is why nature does not move us in the same way that artworks do. We do not see the expression of emotion in nature. (Perhaps some believers in a supernatural creator would disagree, however.)

--The “real artist” perceives objects as “ends in themselves”—pure forms. (159) The real artist does not, for example, read her ontological categories and values into the world (e.g., seeing things as fields and cottages, or as of human importance), but sees (only) the more fundamental lines and colors themselves.