

PHIL 4403: Philosophy of Art  
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2/7/05

**BONUS:** Summary up till now

\*We have been searching for the form of *art*, mostly focusing on the question of what is essential to all art (i.e., a necessary condition). We have considered 3 types of theories, as they emerged chronologically: Representationalism, Expressionism, and Significant Form. Each theory offers a different answer to the question: “What feature(s) is common to all art?” (This is just to say that each theory offers a different necessity condition for being art.)

Though each theory was criticized, and likely each is mistaken, it still is the case that much art is representational, expressive, and/or possesses significant form. And these properties can be relevant to the artistic/aesthetic worth of a painting, musical composition, etc. To say that these theories do not provide necessary conditions is not to say that such properties are irrelevant. Also, even if these theories do not provide necessary conditions, think about plausible ways in which they can be turned into sufficient conditions for art. For example, not all representations count as art—but what additional qualities are needed to make a representation count as art?

It will prove beneficial to stop and recollect the main points of each theory. This is a natural point to pause and reflect, as the readings for the next 2 weeks answer the “form question” in a radically different manner (if they answer it at all).

\*Representationalists hold that all art must be *about* something, where this “aboutness” is representation. Representationalists come in different stripes, in part due to the different types of representation they admit. For example, in class we distinguished natural from conventional representations. One type of natural representation is *imitation*. Early Representationalists latched onto this species of representation and claimed that art is essentially imitative. (Plato and Aristotle made this claim for the specific arts of drama, poetry, and painting, at least.) In class, we considered whether there are types of natural representation besides imitation. Some of us claimed that there are, and grouped them under the category “suggestive representation”. There is purely conventional representation as well. The more sophisticated Representationalist will admit all of these types of representation, so that her theory of art is less vulnerable to counter-examples (and, also, because it seems true!). For example, one could object to Plato’s imitation theory by presenting a non-imitative work of art. The more sophisticated Representationalist can argue that, though non-imitative, this alleged counter-example is still art in virtue of being some other kind of representation. (Of course, in order to vindicate Representationalism the case will need to be made that this example of art, and all others, involves representation.)

Problems:

The main problems for this theory come from straight-forward counter-examples of non-representational art. We could point toward non-representational paintings. But, also, we

could note that much of architecture, music, and the decorative arts clearly are not representational. (With Representationalism, as with the other theories we will encounter, it will be the case that the theory is much more plausible for some arts than for others. Perhaps the end result will be that a unified theory of art should be replaced with a fragmented one.)

\*Expressionists hold that the essence of art is expression—in particular, the expression of an emotion. [Beware that these terms—‘representation’ and ‘expression’—are being used as terms for philosophical theories of art. Connotations from the history of art, for example, should be held at bay.] But different expression theories are generated depending upon where we place this expression:

Artist-focused: For an artifact to count as an artwork, the artist must be motivated by an emotion (i.e., the emotion he expresses).

Artwork-focused: For an artifact to count as an artwork, it must itself express some emotion (regardless of whether the artist was motivated by such an emotion, or such an emotion is provoked in an audience).

Audience-focused: For an artifact to count as an artwork, it must provoke a particular emotion in an audience.

Tolstoy’s *transmission* theory had both an artist-focused and audience-focused requirement. For Tolstoy, art is a kind of communication—a communication of emotions transmitted from artists to audience. Hospers criticized such accounts, denying any artist or audience-focused requirement. According to Hospers the expressive emotion must be predicated of the artwork itself—e.g., the musical piece itself is sad (as opposed to the artist or audience). Accepting Hospers’ criticisms, I offered a speculation regarding how to distinguish representations from expressions (though they are not mutually exclusive). Namely, representations needn’t possess (and typically do not possess) the qualities they represent, but expressions must. (Again, beware that this is a technical use of ‘expression’.) For example, a representation of something tall must not be tall, but an expression of sadness must itself be sad. Note how this speculation is in the spirit of Hospers. Slightly metaphorically, I also suggested that representations *tell* whereas expressions *show*.

Problems:

As before, straight-forward counter-examples can be presented. True, the Expressionists can account for non-representational and abstract art that the Representationalists’ theory misses. But is non-expressive art really impossible? For example, isn’t there such a thing as purely cognitive (and not emotionally expressive) or purely representational art? And, as with Representationalism, much of architecture and the decorative arts seem to be counter-examples. (Though, an Expressionist may be willing to bite the bullet on many so-called decorative arts—just as Bell denies that strictly representational paintings are art.)

Hospers seems to have legitimate criticisms of the artist and audience-focused versions. But, is the artwork-focused account plausible? That is, is it generally true that whenever we say an artwork expresses emotion  $x$ , we should be willing to predicate emotion  $x$  to the artwork directly? A serious account of expression is needed.

\*Clive Bell argued that *significant form*, which stimulates the aesthetic emotion, is necessary for visual art. Bell's account is an interesting combination of a subjective and objective theory of art. The subjectivity comes in when Bell claims that art is that which provokes the aesthetic emotion. At this stage you may think that it is wholly something about appreciators—the presence or absence of the aesthetic emotion—that makes something a work of art. And just as varied situations can provoke, say, anger, varied situations (or objects) can provoke the aesthetic emotion. But Bell claims that there is only one type of situation or feature of objects that provokes the aesthetic emotion in us, and that is significant form. Significant form, an objective feature of artworks, is the essence of art. While Bell first limits his theory to the visual arts, he later extends it at least to the musical arts as well.

'Significant form' refers to certain combinations of line and color. Bell insists that no knowledge of the representational elements of an artwork is necessary for art appreciation. Rather, representational properties are always wholly irrelevant to artistic virtues. While art appreciation requires nothing but knowledge of color and form, critics can help us in detecting significant form. The aesthetic emotions that significant form provokes are different in kind from everyday emotions. (Bell distinguishes works that use form as an object of emotion from those that merely suggest emotions.) In regard to this detachment from everyday life, art is like mathematics.

Problems:

Why is it that only significant form can stimulate the aesthetic emotion? If significant form and the aesthetic emotion can come apart, which is more central to defining art? Can a more precise articulation of both significant form and the aesthetic emotion be provided? If so, does this articulation show them to be independent concepts? Should highly representational "art" really be discredited?