

Perception and Interpretation in the Aesthetic Experience of Art

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ABSTRACT: The present paper discusses the possibility that aesthetic perception and interpretation reveal themselves as mutually inclusive within the same aesthetic experience of art in a non-trivial way. It will take its point of departure from Hans-Georg Gadamer and Noël Carroll. Although they belong to different traditions, both philosophers nonetheless coincide in their indication that the experience of art overflows the region of perception and enjoyment of the aesthetic qualities of works of art. Yet while Gadamer subordinates aesthetic perception and maintains that the experience of art is necessarily hermeneutical, Carroll proposes that the aesthetic and the hermeneutical are two equally genuine responses to art. My claim is that perceptual elements in a work of art are decisive for interpretation, and that this should be properly considered when examining the aesthetic experience of art.

1. Introduction

Perception and interpretation are often discussed separately in relation to the experience of art. The aim of this paper is to offer a concept of aesthetic experience that unites two important notions often treated separately. I will refer to some ideas proposed by Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) on the one hand, and Noël Carroll (b. 1947) on the other. Though belonging to different philosophical traditions, they coincide in considering interpretation as relevant or even decisive in art experience, while taking perception as having no relevant connection to interpretation. Instead of treating them as two separate issues in our response to art, I will argue that interpretation is inconceivable without aesthetic perception in a non-trivial way, and that a particular concept of aesthetic experience can

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be proposed as a unifying notion that embraces perception and interpretation. This article deals with the aesthetic experience of art but I do not assume that aesthetics is restricted to the realm of art; nor do I ignore that the responses to artworks have been conceived in so called non-aesthetic terms, as will be shown.

We should remember that aesthetic experience has traditionally been understood as the immediate recognition of beauty by means of perception. That is to say, the aesthetic belongs to the sensible realm –and is mainly related to form– and not to the intellectual or spiritual realms. If the aesthetic experience is taken as a perceptual approach to formal qualities and the perfection of an autonomous artifact, then the experience of art has to be conceived as a non-interpretative response to works of art. Our two philosophers reasonably claim that works of art have not always been made seeking strictly aesthetic ends. In such cases works of art should not be studied as if they did not have a meaning and as if they could be contemplated aside from the context of the symbolic world in which they were created. Gadamer asserts that every work of art belongs to, and speaks for, a human world to such an extent that its truth cannot be experienced when abstracted from its context and treated as an autonomous object. In this sense, the purely aesthetic does not give justice to art. In contrast, Carroll admits that the aesthetic experience –consisting of the appreciation of formal and/or expressive qualities in a work of art– is as genuine as nonaesthetic approaches such as interpretation.

In Noël Carroll's writings we can find a clear separation between aesthetic experience and art experience, insofar as the former is a particular case of the latter. In other words, the experience of art can be aesthetic, hermeneutic, moral or affective or a combination of any of these. In Gadamer's case, even when he sometimes refers to the same kind of experience as artistic or aesthetic, what he has in mind is that the authentic experience of art is such if it is hermeneutic, and not purely aesthetic. While Gadamer offers interpretation as the only possibility for experiencing art in a relevant way, Carroll admits that art can be aesthetically experienced without interpretation. The point I want to make here is that neither of them take perception as properly involved in the interpretation of art.

In the following section, I will consider Gadamer's ideas on the herme-

neutic experience of art; a further section will be dedicated to Carroll's conception of aesthetic and interpretative experiences of art. At the end of the paper I will discuss aesthetic experience in the light both of perception and interpretation.

2. Gadamer's Hermeneutical Account of Art Experience

Art stands in a fairly relevant place in Hans-Georg Gadamer's work, considering the fact that it has been taken as a model of hermeneutic experience in Gadamer's thought for more than forty years. According to him, art constitutes one of the greatest challenges that are involved in the hermeneutic task of understanding the world. The experience of art is therefore a special way of knowing. In his most important and influential work, *Truth and Method*, Gadamer sets questions such as: 'Is there to be no knowledge in art?'¹ Even when art does not provide scientific nor conceptual knowledge, it conveys truth, and the task of aesthetics should be 'to ground the fact that the experience (*Erfahrung*) of art is a mode of knowledge of a unique kind'.² Traditional aesthetics, he claims, has wrongly considered an artwork as worthy for its own sake, and has enhanced the purely aesthetic as the sole dimension of art. Under the scope of what Gadamer calls 'the aesthetic consciousness', identified as a heritage of the Enlightenment, art is not a matter of truth, but of beauty.³ The purely aesthetic is then conceived in terms of contemplation and appreciation of a work of art as a perfect artifact with admirable qualities, even as the product of genius. Among other things, aesthetic consciousness assumes that art can be abstracted from its symbolic world and exist in a sort of parallel reality. In this perspective, the work of art is a perfect object intended for pure aesthetic pleasure, primarily because of its form and its appearance. Artworks stay therefore in the realm of the sensible and do not reach the realm of the intelligible. Contrariwise, from a

¹ Gadamer (1989: 97).

² *Ibid.* 97-98.

³ In his well known essay "The Origin of the Work of Art", Heidegger (2003: 1-74) had already made this point, being less precise than Gadamer when we speak of aesthetics in general but referring mainly to modern pre-hegelian aesthetics. Hegel thinks that in the realm of art, when we speak of beauty we speak of truth, and Heidegger seems to dismiss this fact.

hermeneutic perspective, following Gadamer, what is actually relevant is what an artwork means, what it says, and not how it appears. In any case, appearance is on a lower level, albeit taken as a necessary vehicle to express meanings.

Since a purely aesthetic experience of art would put the subject in front of an exceptional object that surpasses the territory of the ordinary and of everyday facts, contemplating that sort of object would carry the subject through a state of aesthetic pleasure legitimated as enjoyment of the work's quality and perfection, instead of seeking the meaning or significance it might have. Keeping distance from Kantian aesthetics, Gadamer does not acknowledge aesthetic experience as a disinterested contemplation whose immediate effect is aesthetic pleasure. He also argues against Kant's preference for nature over art as the true domain of beauty, and instead follows Hegel's turn of setting art above nature. Gadamer asserts that natural beauty corresponds to the purely aesthetic, while art expands human experience, historical knowledge and self-knowledge.

With respect to art, Kant speaks of an "intellectualized" pleasure. But this formulation does not help. The "impure", intellectualized pleasure that the work of art evokes is still what really interests us as aestheticians. Indeed, the sharper reflection that Hegel brought to the question of the relation of natural and artistic beauty led him to the valid conclusion that natural beauty is a reflection of the beauty of art.⁴

What gives art its importance is its hermeneutical dimension; art is to be interpreted because it conveys meanings and manifests humans' concerns. For Gadamer, the experience of art cannot be regarded apart from that existential continuity which is the experience of understanding in a hermeneutical sense. Understanding is not a capacity nor a behaviour or anything the subject does in order to know a certain aspect of the world. Gadamer is committed to the hermeneutic experience of art along the model of Heidegger's ontological account. He takes every hermeneutic experience as understanding and, following Heidegger, he thinks that to understand is Dasein's way of being. Interpretation, rather than being a methodical practice, is a manner in which understanding reflects the experience of thinking. Interpretation then is not guided by the search for

⁴Gadamer (1977: 97-98).

a unique meaning in a work of art, but by the enigmatic dialogue with artworks and, in a broader sense, with that which is humanly meaningful. Gadamer states that the experience of art should become that which directs the task of our self-orientation in the world and the task of our own self-understanding.

Since we meet the artwork in the world and encounter a world in the individual artwork, the work of art is not some alien universe into which we are magically transported for a time. Rather, we learn to understand ourselves in and through it, and this means that we sublimate (*aufheben*) the discontinuity and atomism of isolated experiences in the continuity of our own experience.⁵

As we have seen, Gadamer holds that when aesthetics is concerned with purely aesthetic experience, it neglects the fact that the experience of art does not belong to a separate, autonomous realm but is instead integrated into the totality of our experiences. Accordingly, under this perspective the sensible dimension of aesthetic experience becomes marginal while interpretation constitutes the possibility of having the experience of truth through understanding; moreover, the experience of art as understanding opens the possibility of self-understanding and self-transformation in a constant dialogue with the work of art.

3. Aesthetic Experience as a Response to Art: Noël Carroll

In more recent years, the American philosopher Noël Carroll has identified the aesthetic experience as one of the possible responses to art. The experience of art includes aesthetic experience among other responses. In his essay "Four Concepts of Aesthetic Experience", Carroll examines what he calls the traditional, the pragmatic and the allegorical notions of aesthetic experience and then arrives at what he considers an appropriate concept for contemporary criticism.⁶ In relation to the traditional account, the aesthetic experience consists of the pleasure of disinterested contemplation of an artwork. Kant and Hutcheson's approaches and more recent ones such as formalism correspond to this account. The second conception is supported by the pragmatic account, mainly represented by Dewey.

⁵ Gadamer (1989: 97).

⁶ Carroll (2001: 41-62).

For this account, aesthetic experiences are remarkable in the way in which they constitute a sort of model for everyday experiences; the pragmatic account is concerned with the structure of the aesthetic experience since this structure can be found in other significant experiences. The third account, the allegorical, should be mainly identified with Marcuse and Adorno, and has some points in common with the traditional account. The free play of the imagination and understanding, in a Kantian manner, is released from conceptual tasks; in this way, the aesthetic experience of art can serve no purpose and is the opposite of the instrumental reason. Finally, Carroll proposes a fourth account, his own, and calls it deflationary. This notion supposes formal appreciation and/or the acknowledgement of aesthetic and expressive qualities.

Like Gadamer, Carroll rejects the idea of disinterestedness. Conceptions of disinterested aesthetic experience tend to focus on the assumption that this sort of experience has an intrinsic value, and so they disregard what actually happens in the response to art, which is crucial in Carroll's deflationary account. In an aesthetic experience this is related to at least one of the following events:

- (a) We try to recognize the structure of the work of art; that is, we appreciate the work's design as we notice the author's choices in relation to the work's purposes.
- (b) We notice the aesthetic or the expressive properties of the work; that is, we detect the work's qualities. Adjectives such as elegant, graceful, heavy or joyful, for instance, would be suitable for this kind of appreciation.

Design appreciation and quality detection are proper conditions to talk about aesthetic experience, and they both relate to perception. But, as has been said before, Carroll has claimed in several essays that art admits a wide range of responses, among them interpretation and aesthetic experience, as well as moral or emotional responses. Interpretation is thus taken as a nonaesthetic response to art. In an article where Carroll discusses literary interpretation, he maintains that the main goal of interpretation is to attend to the author's intentions because they 'enrich the reading of the text'. The author's intended meaning is therefore 'a resource for engaging

the text.⁷ This assertion can also be maintained in the case of the other arts, since not only literary texts convey meanings. In contrast to aesthetic appreciation,

(...) we also contemplate artworks with an eye to discern latent meanings and structures, and to determining the significance of an artwork in its art historical context. These art responses, often interpretive in nature, are (...) as central as, and certainly no less privileged than, aesthetic responses in regard to our interactions with artworks.⁸

According to Carroll, interpretation and aesthetic appreciation have commonly been considered as rival approaches to art. Some decades ago, artists and critics reacted against aestheticism focusing on artistic messages, and on interpretation as a way of responding to art. In this way, formal and expressive qualities were left aside. In respect to this seeming rivalry, Carroll points that interpretative and aesthetic responses to art are not only equally genuine but sometimes even complementary.

4. Perception and Interpretation: Reconsidering the Aesthetic Experience of Art

Perception of beauty, repeatedly identified with formal structures, has characterized the idea of the aesthetic. This notion hardly pays attention to the artwork's meaning and sense. As we have seen, for Gadamer and Carroll the experience of art goes beyond the traditional notions of aesthetic experience, since both philosophers take into account the realm of meaning and, within it, the historical dimension of works of art. Considered as purely aesthetic (Gadamer) or as aesthetic (Carroll), the realm of perception does not satisfy the conditions to give a proper account of how art can be experienced. Although it is not hard to agree with this, there are two points to be considered here. On the one hand is Carroll's treatment of perception as distinct and independent from interpretation;

⁷ Carroll (2000: 77).

⁸ Carroll (2001: 6).

on the other hand is the marginality of perception in Gadamer's aesthetics. These two ways of dealing with aesthetic perception assume that the sensible realm is not decisive in an experience in which the meaning of the work of art can be reflected. Under this light, aesthetic perception seems to be either marginal or autonomous and, in both cases, it plays no relevant part in interpretation. In this context, meanings and aesthetic qualities do not take part in a unified notion of a genuine experience of art. However, the contrast between interpretation as related to (intelligible) meaning, and aesthetic experience as related to (sensible) appearance seems to be rather artificial.

The concept of the aesthetic experience of art that I have in mind does not presuppose an explicit interpretation of every work of art, because in many instances we are not able to give an account of the meaning or the sense we find in the work. Music, for instance, often escapes from non-technical conceptual explanations. Nonetheless, the historical and human dimension of art is opened to our aesthetic understanding. By this I mean that in the aesthetic experience of art we recognize the work of art as a poetic object, even if we might not fully or explicitly understand its sense, and even if it was not originally intended to cause aesthetic pleasure. The hermeneutical dimension of the aesthetic experience of art allows us to recognize works of art as understandable although not always as understood. Doubt, perplexity, confusion are many times involved in our experiences of art even when interpretation and perception do occur.

I also find it reasonable to consider that understanding the meaning and sense of artworks can happen by recognizing relations among different elements and/or relations between parts and wholes, in structural and also in expressive terms. This recognition would not be strange from the realm of meaning but would actually be the very condition of interpretation. Is it really necessary to separate experiencing art as a significant human creation from realizing in which way poetic elements coexist, follow one another, are repeated, have certain duration, stand in certain level or place, etc.? It shouldn't be forgotten that aesthetic qualities are the result of the author's choices, of his use of a wide range of resources –technical, material, stylistic, thematic, symbolic and other sort of poetical means– which are much more than tools to shape significant objects. They actually constitute part of the sense we expect to find in a work of art. I would

not say, following Carroll, that perceiving artworks in an aesthetic manner might enter into collaboration with interpreting meanings or vice versa. I propose, instead, that whenever we find works of art to be perceived, we are already walking on the path of sense-making. On the other hand, as a response to Gadamer's underestimation of perception, I would hold that in the experience of art, regarded as an interpretative experience, the role of perception is crucial and should not be taken as a mere prerequisite to achieve the true dimension of an art experience, that is, the intelligible level of meaning.

Aesthetic perception is never neutral; artistic objects are perceived as something, as when discrete brushstrokes are seen as the leaves of a tree. In the aesthetic experience, meaning permeates perception. Art cannot be interpreted as art without being considered as a sensible and poetic object; in other words, interpretation cannot disregard the fact that a work of art is an object whose meaning has been shaped in a particular way of appearance. Interpretation of a work of art as such, rather than as a strictly linguistic or historical fact, should be considered as aesthetic interpretation, where meaning and the sensible are interwoven. Under this light I find it justified to discuss the aesthetic experience of art.

A final consideration should be made in regard to Gadamer and Carroll. There can certainly be found important differences between how they think of interpretation in art. Gadamer's orientation is ontological, while Carroll moves more in the domain of criticism. Nonetheless, they do not restrict the discussion to specific kinds of interpretation nor they have in mind a specific sort of interpreter. For none of them is interpretation necessarily related to specialized practices. Although Carroll takes in account the task of the critic, he also recognizes that readers, spectators, or listeners who have a basic artistic education are themselves interpreters. Under Gadamer's perspective, interpretation means understanding, and understanding is an ontological mode of being of every human who is inevitably raised in a tradition. I find that in both authors interpretation is more than a method for achieving meanings; it is actually a mode of experiencing art. On the other hand, they both hold that art is not detached from other aspects of life, and that the experience of art should not be taken as an extraordinary or autonomous dimension unrelated to our concerns and beliefs. To suggest that Carroll and Gadamer share a sort of ontologi-

cal commitment would be misleading. I would rather say that it is worthy of consideration that, belonging to different philosophical traditions, they both contribute to the conformation of a notion of interpretation that has the experience of art seriously in mind.

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