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Using Philosophy of Technology to Talk about Art

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ABSTRACT. In this paper I will demonstrate how methods drawn from the philosophy of technology can be used to speak meaningfully about the 'cognitive functions' of artworks: that is, how artworks mean things. In particular, I argue that the idea of affordances (drawn from philosophy of technology and, ultimately, psychology) can be used to cash out the claim that artworks possess cognitive functions. In doing so, it is built upon two foundational claims. First, that philosophy of technology and philosophy of art share a number of foundational questions and concerns. Second, that there is analytical utility in sharing the hitherto domain-specific methods and schemas that have been developed to address those questions and concerns.

1. Introduction

Despite the fact that philosophy of technology and philosophy of art are both materially-oriented disciplines, there is remarkably little overlap between the two subfields—at least within philosophy proper. This should strike us as strange. There are few principled reasons as to why philosophers of technology and philosophers of art should have so little to do with one another. After all, philosophers of technology and philosophy of art share a number of foundational questions: questions about how and why material objects look the way they do; the ways in which meaning is expressed and/or communicated by those objects; the functions they fulfil and their appropriateness for those functions; the ways in which they both influence and are influenced by the cultures in which they are embedded. Even in domains (such as ethics and philosophy of design) where there exists a prima facie obvious connection between art and technology, the terrain lies largely untilled.

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The unwillingness to speak across the aisle strikes me as a problem. Both philosophy of technology and philosophy of art have developed extremely powerful and precise analytical methods and conceptual schemas to help address, and in some cases dissolve, the various problems around which the two respective subfields are oriented. Unfortunately, many of these methods and schemas remain within their respective silos; they are simply not accessible to scholars working outside of those narrow fields. This is where the problem lies. Given the wealth of foundational problems and concerns that is shared between the two disciplines, I think that there is obvious utility in sharing the methods and schemas that have been developed to address those self-same problems and concerns. Unfortunately, this kind of disciplinary cross-pollination is very rare in practice.

Given that observation, in this paper I will explore one example wherein methods from the philosophy of technology can be used to address an open problem within the philosophy of art: in this case, how to speak about the cognitive functions—the meanings—of artworks.

2. Cognitive Functions

Speaking broadly, aesthetic cognitivism refers to a cluster of positions that all hinge upon the assumption that art can, as Gordon Graham claims, "at its best" constitute a form of understanding, and is thus deserving of the "same evaluative status as science" (1996, p. 1). Or, per Nelson Goodman, "the arts must be taken no less seriously than the sciences as modes of discovery, creation, and enlargement of knowledge in the broad sense of advancement of the understanding" (1978, p. 102).

More specifically, Christoph Baumberger identifies aesthetic cognitivism as the confluence of two claims: the epistemic claim that "artworks have cognitive functions", and the aesthetic claim that "cognitive functions of artworks partly determine their artistic value" (2013, p. 41). Per the epistemic claim, aesthetic cognitivists claim that artworks possess cognitive functions, and that these cognitive functions can teach audiences about a given state of affairs in a substantive, non-trivial way. This does not imply that artworks must possess cognitive functions, of course; only that artworks are capable of having cognitive functions. Moreover, and per the aesthetic claim, these functions partially determine the aesthetic worth of those artworks. They are among the plurality of artistic values that we properly invoke when making assessments of beauty. Out of these two criteria, the epistemic and the aesthetic, it is the first that is the object of our attention here.

So, how can artworks have cognitive functions? There are two prevailing models in the cognitivist literature: one that argues that artworks instantiate propositional, philosophical knowledge, and one that argues that artworks instantiate phenomenal, experiential knowledge. With respect to the former, scholars such as Noël Carroll (2002) and Catherine Elgin (2007) argue that the contents of artworks should be understood as analogous to thought experiments. The appeal of this approach is obvious: philosophers and scientists regularly employ fictions and metaphors—philosophical zombies, brains in vats, cats in boxes—in order to point to propositional facts about the world. Artworks perform a similar task, so proponents of this view claim, in that they also use falsehoods to gesture meaningfully towards true claims. Thus artworks facilitate the generation of propositional facts both novel and true.

However, there are problems with this position. As John Gibson observes, there is a clear difference between thought experiments and artworks is that thought experiments are accompanied by an explanatory apparatus that expresses the propositional facts, instead of the facts being expressed by the thought experiment itself. Given that, does it make sense to say that the thought experiment actually instantiates truth claims? This is not at all clear. Indeed, I think it's entirely plausible to say that, contrary to Carroll and Elgin, truth claims are not a feature of thought experiments at all. While artworks and thought experiments might indeed be relevantly similar, if truth claims associated with a given thought experiment actually reside in the explanatory apparatus that accompanies that experiment, it's not at all clear how artworks or thought experiments can themselves contain or instantiate propositional truth claims.

Meanwhile, with respect to the experiential approach, Dorothy Walsh (1969) and Alex Burri (2007), among others, have argued that works of art offer experiential knowledge rather than propositional knowledge: what it would be like to be in a war zone, or have an affair in 19th century France or fight a dragon. It's a tempting thought, and one which gels nicely with a lot of common bromides about the virtues of art (and of literature in particular): that engaging meaningfully with artworks leaves us better equipped to take stock of other minds because we're able to somehow experience what they experienced.

Unfortunately, I do not think that this is a viable option either. While there is a wealth of evidence that suggests some fruitful link between exposure to the arts and development of certain interpersonal capacities like empathy,[98] experiences expressed by artworks are obviously not sufficiently granular to actually afford an audience the phenomenal experience represented. For example, while I've read a number of books set in war zones, I am not so delusional as to think that this means I have experience of being in a war zone. Instead, and at best, a book set in a war zone offers me an opportunity to examine what I might be like in a war zone, in light of another's testimony—although there obviously is no way to test this counterfactual. Any experiential knowledge I might thereby acquire is about myself, rather than the phenomenon in question.

3. Knowledge Performances

These views have non-trivial problems. In response, I outline a model of the cognitive functions of artworks that is not premised upon its capacity to share propositional or phenomenal knowledge and is instead grounded in a theory of knowledge capable of accounting for non-propositional performances. To this end, I endorse the theory of knowledge developed by neo-pragmatist philosopher of technology Barry Allen: that knowledge is a "form of success, a superlative performance". When I say that knowledge is 'performative' rather than propositional or experiential, I am not being metaphorical. Knowledge, Allen claims, is not simply something you possess but is instead something you do. Merely possessing a fact does say anything about the knowledge you have; instead, you can only demonstrate your knowledge by employing that fact as part of some kind of performance—and in particular, a 'superlative' performance.

Allen, in both *Knowledge and Civilization* (2005) and *Artifice and Design* (2008) argues that knowledge, properly understood, is a species of superlative performance. A 'performance', as I take Allen to mean it, is 'an intentioned activity with an intended outcome', with intentional action glossed as a confluence of beliefs, desires, and intentions (Malle and Knobe, 1997, p. 105). Under this gloss, most actions that human beings voluntarily do constitute performances of one kind or another. Catching a train, tying your shoelaces, or eating a hamburger are all kinds of performances, as all of which are kinds of intentional action that have given outcomes in mind. Consequently, performance itself is an unremarkable phenomenon. To call something a performance is simply to situate it within the broader context of intelligible human action.

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[98] For a small selection of the scholarship in this field, refer to (Mar et al., 2006), (Mar and Oatley, 2008), (Djikic et al., 2009), (Kidd and Castano, 2013), (Bal and Veltkamp, 2013), and (Vezzali et al., 2015).

Knowledge, Allen argues, is also a performance. However, it is a performance of a special kind in that, he says, it must be 'superlative'. Stating that a performance is superlative is not to imply that that performance merely meets whatever constitutes the success criteria for that specific performance. Succeeding in catching a train, or tying one's shoelaces, or eating a hamburger is, in most cases, a pretty unremarkable achievement. These kinds of successes, assuming that you have the normal, everyday capacities that most people possess, are merely habitual or reliable. Instead, a superlative performance is a successful performance that is also exemplary, because it meets its success criteria in some remarkable or novel way. These performances, for both Allen and myself, are knowledge. Facts may be true or false, but it is in knowing how to wield those facts (or physical tools, or experiences, or concepts, or whatever else you might be employing in the given case) with discretion, with acumen, with mastery. Moreover, because they are performed, knowledge is available to perception: they are the proof in the pudding; they are where rubber hits the road.

The achievement, the accomplishment, is what distinguishes knowledge, making it different from belief, opinion, error, and so on. Knowledge is neither metaphysically 'real', being an artifact with no reality apart from us, nor merely nominal, since it depends on effectiveness, and not just conventions of discourse. What distinguishes knowing is not where it comes from but the performance it achieves (Allen, 2005, p. 25).

Allen's insight is, I think, profound: it radically reframes and corrects how we should properly conceptualise knowledge. In addition, Allen's theory of knowledge also gives us the foundation from which to develop a richer picture of how artworks can possess cognitive functions. We can do this by expanding upon Allen's performative theory of knowledge with the notion of 'affordances', particularly as affordances are employed by philosophers of technology.

4. Artwork Affordances

Philosophers of technology use 'affordances' to capture the ways in which a given tool increases our capacities in some way, or makes a desired outcome possible or easier to realise. Swimming goggles afford us the ability to better see underwater. Paintbrushes afford us the ability to precisely apply paint. Rockets afford travelling to the moon. Affordances, in short, provide a means of conceptualising what different technologies do for us.

Affordances give us a way of unpacking how different technologies can facilitate superlative performances. By virtue of offering affordances, technology makes certain kinds of performances possible. Affordances also give us a way to speak about the cognitive functions of technology, without forcing us to get bogged down in questions of meaning or content (whether propositional, phenomenological or otherwise). That is, the cognitive function of a given piece of technology lies not in the propositional or phenomenological knowledge that it somehow instantiates, but rather in what it can teach us via the performances that that technology can afford. Consider, for instance, a telescope. The power of a telescope lies in what it allows us to do: namely, letting us see very far away. In doing so, the telescope gives us access to parts of the universe that are inaccessible by the naked eye, affording us the opportunity to make new and better descriptions of the universe. The experiences afforded by the telescope fully comprise the didactic or pedagogic potential—that is, the cognitive functions—of the telescope; the affordances provided and the cognitive functions are one and the same.

So, what does this mean for artworks? They too are a kind of technology, despite a number of claims to the contrary. They are, after all, the products of human intention in the same way that other tools are the products of human intention: they are, after all, designed and created for a given purpose. Does this imply that artworks can provide affordances? I think yes. In the event that artworks possess cognitive functions, we can and should also expect them to provide affordances. In short, they should do things for us, in that they should increase our performative capacities in some significant, identifiable, and measurable way.

With all that in mind, does the claim that artworks constitute a class of technology imply that artworks can provide affordances? I think yes. In the event that artworks possess cognitive functions—if they are indeed "active and competent players in the field of knowledge", to quote John Gibson—we can and should also expect them to provide affordances. They should, in short, do things for us in some significant, identifiable, and measurable way. It is in offering affordances that artworks have the capacity to teach us. Furthermore, in increasing our performative capacities in some significant, identifiable, and measurable way, the affordances offered by artworks should be empirically available in exactly the way that any performance (catching a bus, eating a hamburger, defending heliocentrism in light of your empirical observations) is empirically available.

This method, then, offers a means by which we can take stock of the cognitive functions of artworks without committing ourselves to either the propositional nor the phenomenal approaches within cognitivism (along with their concomitant flaws). Furthermore, it has the benefit of being empirically rich: if artworks possess cognitive functions as outlined, the presence of these cognitive functions should be straightforwardly available to sense and intuition.

5. Cubism: A Case Study

While I'm still working through the ramifications of this claim, let's look at one possible example. From the time of Giotto until the end of the 19th century, a single perspective—otherwise called 'Renaissance pictorial perspective'—was the norm in Western art. In single perspective a painting of a given scene or object was painted from one position: an attempt to communicate, with fidelity, how the depicted scene appeared (or would have appeared, anyway) from a single point in space. Consequently, and "in anticipation of Descartes", Pau Pedragosa writes, single perspective "concerned itself with our perspective on the things that surround us in concrete situations". In doing so, Renaissance pictorial perspective "presents both objectified space and the subject that effects this objectification: it fixes both the observer and that which is observed" (Pedragosa, 2014, p. 748).

By the end of the 19th century, however, these perspectival norms were being actively corroded. As early as the 1880s, work by Impressionists and Post-Impressionists such as Claude Monet, Vincent van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, and Paul Cézanne had begun to play with perspective in interesting ways. By 1910, these Renaissance norms were in tatters. Movements such as Cubism sought to free art from the tyranny of single perspective, permitting instead paintings a sculpture that captured scenes and objects from multiple perspectives, all at the same time. As the Cubist painter Jean Metzinger wrote in 1911:

> Already they have uprooted the prejudice that commanded the painter to remain motionless in front of the object, at a fixed distance from it, and to catch on the canvas no more than a retinal photograph more or less modified by 'personal feeling'. They have allowed themselves to move round the object, in order to give, under the control of intelligence, a concrete representation of it, made up of several successive aspects. Formerly a picture took possession of space, now it reigns also in time (quoted in Frye, 1966, p. 66–67).

It is hard to overstate the influence of this development. While it might seem quite modest now, the notion that an artist could even try to capture an image from multiple perspectives within the same piece of art was at the time seen as radically novel; a sharp repudiation of the last 700 years of Western art. However, this is not all that Cubism offers. Indeed, I claim, Cubist multiperspective also offers a very specific affordance: the opportunity to experience and adopt what Husserl called the 'phenomenological epoché'.

Usually translated as 'bracketing', epoché is the method by which a person can consciously escape the 'natural attitude' of everyday experience and instead begin to analyse the granular parts of that experience. Husserl argues that, rather than being a thing given to us, whole and seamless, subjective experience is an ongoing action whereby we integrate a "continuity of changing perceptions" via a process of "synthetical consciousness" (Husserl, 1983, p. 86). We do not passively receive a veridical impression of the world via our eyes and other sense organs, but instead, we construct a picture of the world from the riot of sense impressions at our disposal. Adopting epoché makes that process of synthetical consciousness clear to us. Now let us compare that account with what the Cubists themselves thought they were doing:

> We never, in fact, see an object in all its dimensions at once. Therefore, what has to be done is to fill in a gap in our seeing. Conception gives us the means. Conception makes us aware of the object in all its forms […] When I think of a book, I do not perceive it in any particular dimension but in all of them at once. And so, if the painter succeeds in rendering the object in all its dimensions, he achieves a work of method which is of a higher order than one painted according to the visual dimensions only (quoted in Frye, 1966, p. 95).

Remarkably, and in spite of no obvious personal or causal connection with the early phenomenologists, Cubists were clearly engaging with the self-same concerns.[99] They too were struggling with the idea that consciousness is not a fluid thing, but is instead cobbled together in fits and starts via some process of perceptual integration. They were, in short, adopting epoché. Moreover, what makes Cubist art 'Cubist' is an attempt to communicate these facts. When we look at a work of Cubist art—say Metzinger's La Femme au Cheval (1911–12)—we are looking that artworks that afford an impression of phenomenological epoché. This is what I take to be the key cognitive function of Cubist works: they afford a means of understanding and experiencing epoché without ever having to crack open a volume of Husserl.

Furthermore, this picture of the cognitive functions on display does not run afoul of the criticisms levelled against the propositional and experiential cognitivist accounts. Metzinger's La Femme au Cheval is neither a text that offers propositional philosophical knowledge (despite its deeply philosophical nature) nor does it offer us phenomenological experience of the horse in question. Instead, it is an artwork that affords us the opportunity to reflect upon what it is like to experience something: it affords a species of intentional, structured experience that, when employed properly, facilitates a superlative performance of epoché.

6. Conclusion

I believe that this particular case demonstrates the basic soundness of the intuition with which I began this talk: that there is obvious utility in bringing philosophy of art and philosophy of technology together in conversation. In this particular instance, I employed two concepts drawn from philosophy of technology—the performative epistemology of Barry Allen, and the idea of affordances—to help clarify some outstanding issues in aesthetic cognitivism. In doing so, I trust that I have made clear, first, that philosophy of art and philosophy of technology share a non-trivial number of questions and concerns; and second, that there are good pragmatic reasons to share analytical methods and conceptual schemes between those two disciplines.

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[99] Cf. Slettene, 1997, Majewska, 1999, Macdonald, 2005 and Pedragosa, 2014, among many others.

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