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Edited by Dan-Eugen Ratiu and Connell Vaughan

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The Cutting Effect: a Contribution to Moderate Contextualism in Aesthetics

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ABSTRACT. The *cutting effect* appears when the expressive power of a visual or a sound fragment (a scream or a bloodied face, for example) shown in an assumed representational medium (such as the radio, TV or movies) becomes isolated (or extracted) from the normal context that modulates its particular meaning and then the audience experience a momentary feeling of strangeness and distress due of the fleeting lack of context of reference. I am convinced that there are some interesting consequences to learn from these kinds of situations concerning the aesthetics of expressive and perceptive phenomena in representation. My hypothesis is that if I feel the distressing momentary impression after the scream of the *cutting effect*, it is not only (or not mainly) a cause of the lack of a context, but a cause of a primary expressive power of the scream that comes to touch me (to hurt me). This primary expressive power is normally (that is, out of the *cutting effect* situations) modulated by the context conditions, but emerges extraordinarily in the *cutting effect* cases. If my hypothesis is right, there is a coming back consequence, or I would prefer to speak better of a new way of explanation for some kind of ordinary (that is, no *cutting*) cases of reception. (1) We could refer to some particular cases as “resistance to the anaesthesia of context”. For example: a lot of people are unable to watch some scenes from violent or horror movies even being aware of the representational conditions. Moreover, (2) it would reinforce the idea that the scream or the bloodied face are not a property, a monopoly or a free tool of the actor nor the filmmaker, but rather they have an expressive power which leaks and exceeds the intention of the actor (or the emitter). Finally, (3) it would help us to support the idea of the perceptive character of the expression in aesthetic understanding. It means that there is for the audience a perceptive element which, even though it is not *natural* (to the extent that it comes from culture and education), it has to be not just *understood* but rather (at the same time) *perceived*.

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I was listening to the radio while I brushed my teeth. Suddenly, in the middle of the radio programme (in fact, it was a radio ad about a new radio show) I heard a scream and somebody said “no, no, please!” in a very distressing way. Some seconds later I became aware of the fact that the cry was produced by the voice of an actor announcing a new programme of radio *noir* stories entitled “Noir and criminal”. I felt a strange impression: my first reaction to the scream exceeded (for me) the standard dose of discomfort tolerable when normally listening to the radio. In other words, it was not an especially foreseen or previously contextualized moment.

A second example: I was watching a basketball match on my TV and suddenly, without any warning, a bloodied face appeared to me in close-up on the screen. Some seconds after I discovered that it was a short ad for the telefilm which was programmed just after the match, but for a few seconds I felt the same strange impression of helplessness and distress as I did in the previous example.

I would propose to name this phenomenon “the *cutting effect*”: it appears when the expressive power of a visual or a sound fragment becomes isolated (or extracted) from the normal context that modulates its particular meaning and then the audience experience a momentary feeling of strangeness and distress due of the fleeting lack of context of reference.

I am convinced that there are some interesting consequences to learn from these kinds of situations concerning the aesthetics of expressive and perceptive phenomena in representation. But I need to make some previous remarks about my examples. Firstly, my examples are cases of not necessarily artistic objects: a radio programme and a telefilm could be artistic objects, though not necessarily (as is often the case). However, it would be easy likewise to imagine that the scream or the bloodied face were originally part of a Hitchcock film. The context of reception concerning the experiences of both examples is not an artistic one either, even if we could imagine artistic situations for it (without excluding radio and television media). Secondly, the *cutting effect* has not necessarily been connected with the problem of fictional status, for such an effect could be perfectly conceived as resulting from a scream or a bloodied face being part of a non-fictional structure (a documentary, or a news program, for example).

Thirdly, I have underlined the representational condition of that phenomenon in order to purposely exclude the cases of screams or bloodied faces perceived in direct or living situations. The context is still playing a relevant role in our reaction, of course, but in this case the scream or the bloodied face are not shown in an assumed representational medium (such as the radio, TV or movies). I cannot deny the influence of my experiences of reaction towards direct screams and bloodied faces on my perception of represented ones, but the representational element (that is, the scream or the bloodied face on the radio, film or TV excerpt) is a requisite for the aesthetic (and not necessarily artistic) interests of my paper. Fourthly, my paper has just a tangential relationship with the theoretical discussion about the nature of expression in art and aesthetic experiences (*vid.* Kivy, Davis, Matravers, etc.) However, later I will utilise a Gombrich's classical distinction between different kinds of functions of the expression in art with the purpose of supporting my thesis.

The initial approach in order to explain the *cutting effect* is a certain underlining of an aspect of contextualism, namely that aspect concerning the immediate surroundings of a fragment (that is, the textual context). Of course, contextualism emphasizes other aspects (historical ones, especially) of the context of the work. Moreover, I'm aware of the fact that I'm proposing a certain generalization of the contextualist thesis, given that Levinson's contextualism concerns artworks while the objects of the *cutting effect* may not necessarily be artistic objects. Then, the textual context is just the closer or internal part of a broader context that has been claimed by contextualists such as Levinson, in the analytical field of study. I quote Levinson:

Structures or forms *per se*, detached from their emplacements in traditions, styles, oeuvres, and historical moments, are simply incapable of conveying the meanings, significances and resonances that informed criticism and response to artworks normally ascribes to them. (Levinson 2007, p. 8)

If my generalization is (*grosso modo*) accepted, any representation (in

aesthetic situations, at least) has to have a perceptive-understanding background without which neither effective expression nor effective reception can be explained. It is difficult to deny that the representational meaning of a scream or a bloodied face is deeply modulated by *rhetoric*, which we could define as the codes governing the particular syntactic and semantic contexts of the aesthetic discourse in a particular medium. A scream in a film by Hitchcock takes its particular and characteristic meaning from the editing work, the narrative frame, Hitchcock's filmic style, and the implicit condition of filmic representation and reception. The meaning of a bloodied face in a chapter of a TV series (*CSI*, for example) is specifically supported and conditioned by the particular context of reception (including socio-historical conditions) in which that image fits. Of course, fiction is just one of the possible contexts. We could think of other possible contexts of representation such as TV news, documentaries or theatre pieces where a scream or a bloodied face can feature. Several theorists have shown that idea brilliantly through theoretical fields of study like Semiotics (for instance): Calabrese, Leutrat, etc. Nevertheless, Levinson's contextualism seems to convey a superior version of that idea built into a theoretical frame.

Prima facie, the *cutting effect* seems to provide support for contextualism, for my feeling of strangeness due to the *cutting effect* stops working when the normal contextual conditions are present. But, is that all? Is the only and complete cause of my feeling of strangeness aroused from the *cutting effect*? My answer is no: there is something more than the lack of context, something to learn from these exceptional cases in order to understand the working of reception and expression in normal artistic and aesthetic cases.

I'm not interested in reviving here the debate about when and why a telefilm can be considered an artistic object or not. I have enough to ponder over by remarking that the conclusions resulting from the analysis of the *cutting effect* involve cases that are not necessarily artistic. In fact, we can find effects of strangeness very similar to the *cutting effect* in commercials, for some launch campaigns insert images or sounds apparently (or momentarily) out of context in TV ads or billboards in order to capture the audience's attention. Of course, in artistic cinema we can find a lot of effects

of strangeness and disturbing feelings, a cause of the disgust caused by the images of a mechanic peacock (Eisenstein's *October*), or a slit eyeball (Buñuel's *Un chien andalou*), even if we ought to specify very different kinds of context and situations "out of context" in these cases. We can also ask, concerning the *cutting effect*, if the same feeling of strangeness produced by the examples of the scream and the bloodied face would be produced by fragments without "bleeding" (in the sense of appealing less to our basic fears, alerts and preventions).

What other causes could be involved in the feeling of strangeness in the *cutting effect*? Let's look for a second (complementary) explanation from what I will call "the *primary* approach": the *cutting effect* reveals the existence of a primary (basic) underlying layer of expressive power which is the main reason for our feeling of strangeness in those especial cases of *cutting effect*. I have consciously avoided the temptation to speak of a *natural* underlying layer because it is also culturally and educationally conditioned in the end. I prefer rather to speak of a primary or basic underlying layer. My hypothesis, then, is that if I feel the distressing momentary impression after the scream of the *cutting effect*, it is not only (or not mainly) a cause of the lack of a coherent context, but a cause of the primary expressive power of the scream (or the bloodied face) that comes to touch me, to *hurt* me. This primary expressive power is present as well, even if modulated by the context conditions, in normal cases, but emerges extraordinarily in the *cutting effect* cases. Coming back to the examples of the *cutting effect*, I feel disturbed when I hear the scream or I see the bloodied face because its expressive primary power activates my "natural?" (well, not exactly...) sensitivity to it (something which reminds me of reactions to danger, my neighbour's pain, or something like that).

There are a lot of very interesting developments of that idea. I will sketch out some of them in the last part of my paper. However, I have decided to focus on the non-naturalistic character of the primary power. In order to this, I will use Gombrich's theory of the feedback of expression in art. Gombrich's theory claims for a continuous interacting of feeling and form in art which could be able to underpass the limitation of three previous (historical) theories of expression: the magico-medical theory, the Romantic

theory and the theory of collective mind. Every theory in turn activates one or more of the three functions of expression described by Gombrich: the function of symptom, the function of signal and the function of symbol. Concerning the function of symptom, "We can say that frowning is such a symptom of anger, blushing a symptom of embarrassment" in a way similar to "the dog wagging its tail to welcome its master displays such a symptom" (Gombrich 1996, 142). The function of signal refers to "the possibility of arousing emotions through visible or audible signs", like "the hen" calling "the chickens to their food" or "warning them of impending danger" (Gombrich 1996, p. 142). The function of symbol, exclusive of humans, implies that "signs can be used to represent or depict emotional states, as when a writer describes a scene and makes us understand the feelings of his hero" (Gombrich 1996, p. 142). Gombrich's example of the trumpet call tries to synthesize it (I quote):

[...] consider a trumpet-call. The ancients would have stressed its capacity to arouse the emotion of courage and aggression; the Renaissance would have used it, say in an opera, to represent martial feelings; a Romantic composer might have inserted a trumpet-call into his symphony to express his emotion of triumph: all these interpretations seem to me legitimate. But we must never forget that the trumpet-call is part of the tradition of the culture, and that the composer who used it discovered its power by studying his own response. Having done so, he can find new applications, new variants and new feeling tones, and make us realise that this trumpet call is his and his alone. (Gombrich 1996, pp. 154-5)

Obviously, a trumpet call has a cultural component much more sophisticated than a scream or a bloodied face. However, we cannot forget that these last two examples, to the extent that they can be utilized as expressive resources in an artwork, also have cultural components, and it can be proved just by comparing a Christ sculpture by Salzillo with a close-up by Tarantino, or a scream in Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* with Janet Leigh's scream in Hitchcock's *Psycho*.

Gombrich's theory is a centripetal one because:

The expressive signs come first, and it is they which release the emotional response in the actor, the orator and, and I should like to believe, in any artist, whether painter, poet or musician. (Gombrich 1996, p. 151)

What if we think about our scream or bloodied face in terms of Gombrich's theory? The scream comes first and it releases the emotion of disturbance. But the frayed edge which appears in the *cutting effect* is just the same thing that the artist develops for artistic expression, to the point of bringing an original and personal meaning to it. The sound or the image that make our examples of the *cutting effect* do not make an artwork, and then there is no room for the original development which is characteristic of artistic expression. Of course, I am not denying the emotions currently linked to the scream and the bloodied face: the scream terrifies me and the bloodied face startles me, but what we have in the case of the *cutting effect* are a scream and a bloodied face already represented in an audio-visual medium different to the direct live experience. "Represented" means also performed by an actor or actress, but it means especially that the audience is carrying some expectations for receiving an expressive sign appropriately articulated in a discourse, fitting in it. The problem which constitutes the *cutting effect* is that, on the contrary, the expressive sign does not fit in its context for the spectator and it pushes a button which causes a raw, even if not exactly "natural" response.

What does "natural" mean in terms of the naïf (and mistaken) "naturalistic" version of the primary approach?

Of course, a scream is a natural reaction (almost universal) to experiences of pain and everybody is able to hear it as a symptom of pain. But remember that in the *cutting effect* we have a represented scream, not a direct one, even if it is not an artwork. The exception of our *cutting effect* examples would be radio or television being utilized for live and direct broadcasting, but in our examples the audience is never expecting that the scream could be the expression of a pain actually felt or that the bloodied

face could be the expression of a live attack to somebody's face just an instant ago. While in contrast we have strong reasons to support the anti-naturalist character of the primary approach: the *cutting effect*, being part of an aesthetic object or being part of an artistic object, is language in the same sense of Gombrich's assertion in his centripetal theory when he says that it is not the case that feelings and emotions come first (feelings and emotions that would get dressed up by the artist with words of his native language), but on the contrary (I quote),

As with the symptoms of the expression, only more so, it will be language which suggests and arouses his feelings in a constant movement of interaction. As the great English critic, I.A. Richards, increasingly stressed, after he had himself turned to the writing of poetry, it is the language which inspires the poet. Once more we can speak of the centripetal theory of expression: language offering the poet the means to shape his feelings or thoughts into artistic creation. (Gombrich 1996, p. 152)

We would say that in the *cutting effect* the centripetal force of the expressive element is like an idle wheel spinning in the air. Just because it lacks the development existing in the aesthetic structure, and very especially in the artistic structure. Just because it lacks the bonus of creativity which makes the artistic meaning untamed for it lays on the complexity, wide range, and openness of the context. It allows, in short, "the idea of art as self-expression" (Gombrich, 1996, p. 155). And it is perfectly compatible with the idea of aesthetic appreciation as laying on basic human acting (in the beginning is the Act, Wittgenstein *dixit*).

How might my reflection on the *cutting effect* contribute to a moderate contextualism? What kind of moderation may it provide to contextualism? In short, it provides two things. First, to emphasize the existence of an underlying layer of expressive power which is at the base of aesthetic understanding (and, especially, at the base of artistic understanding). That basic or primary layer brings with it the idea of a kind of stratification in the process of aesthetic and artistic understanding intimately linked with the natural and cultural conditions of expressive acts

and also intimately linked with the central role of context (in a wide sense of context). Second, the *cutting effect* proves that there is a constant interaction between language and expressive results (as feelings, emotions or thoughts) which is necessary to account for the creative and receptive processes in aesthetics and art experiences. And that second remark is, in the end, just a way to underlie the dynamic (that is, interactive) character of expression in the framework of a contextualist approach.

Finally, I would modestly sketch some ways of developing the consequences drawn from the *cutting effect* analysis. Of course, my aim is simply to point to some aesthetic sub-zones or aesthetic problems which could somehow be illuminated, even if not clearly solved, taking advantage of some tools derived from the *cutting effect* analysis. (1) The particular cases referred to as “resistance to the anaesthesia of context”. A typical example: a lot of people are unable to watch some scenes from violent or horror movies even being aware of the representational conditions. Is there some kind of basic layer involved which is perfectly compatible with the awareness of the representation and the contextual conditions? (2) The classical opposition between the idea of the expressive element as a property, a monopoly or a free tool in the hands of the actor or the filmmaker, and the idea (summarized by Diderot in his *paradoxe du comédien*) that the good actor has to be in complete control of his own emotions in order to express effectively the emotions of the character. Of course, the *cutting effect* is a really extraordinary situation and for that very reason it works as a valuable test or symptom of a component of ordinary expressive situations, but it would help us to explain more ordinary aesthetic cases where a scream or a bloodied face have an expressive power which leak and exceed the intention of the actor (or the emitter), for example in art criticism, in order to justify a negative aesthetic judgment about a particular *montage* or a particular performance. In my opinion, it could be somehow useful in order to reinforce the idea that the emitter (actor, filmmaker, documentarist, etc) works in order to modulate and knock into shape that expressive power, but he does not have the absolute domain of it. (3) Thirdly, if my hypothesis is right, it would help us to support the idea of the perceptive character of expression in aesthetic understanding. It means that

there is for the audience a perceptive element which, even though it is not *natural* (to the extent that it comes from culture and education), it has to be not just *understood* but rather (at the same time) *perceived*.

Just to finish, I have to insist on the fact that I am aware of the differences between aesthetic and artistic cases. I am also aware of the very important differences and nuances imposed on my hypothesis by the particular characteristics and the particular rhetoric resources of every medium (film, radio, painting, opera, etc.). However, I hope that I have been able to show that there are interesting conclusions to draw from the kind of experience that I have proposed and baptised (as the *cutting effect*), even if my conclusions are disputable or provisional.

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