



Disputing Taste

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I. Introduction

De gustibus non est disputandum, or so the old saying goes. And yet we do dispute so-called matters of taste both often and passionately. This being the case, what principles, if any, can we apply to these debates in order to reach a mutual understanding? Or are such matters better thought of as merely subjective and left alone? To answer these questions, what is needed is a means of knowing about aesthetic objects. (For purposes of simplicity, this essay will concentrate specifically on art, as opposed to other possible objects of aesthetic appreciation.) However, the exact means by which we build our epistemology of art will depend on the way that we conceive of the art of epistemology. Indeed, many of the problems concerning subjectivity and objectivity that occur in the field of aesthetic evaluation also occur in the field of moral evaluation. Hence, in refining our sense of the art of epistemology by means of the epistemology of art, we may be able to arrive at a more general epistemology of value that can be applied in a diverse array of philosophically interesting fields.

There are two chief questions concerning the epistemology of art that need to be tackled: How do we tell if something is art, and once we know that it is art, how do we

interpret it? Because of their difficulty, the available space only allows us to tackle the second question here, so the first will be held in abeyance (or at least to as large a degree as is possible given the interrelated nature of the questions). Arthur Danto suggests that interpreting art relies on the use of an “is of artistic identification,” but insufficiently clarifies the mechanism by which this “is” is used and understood. To make it more clear we will take the theory of representation given by Richard Wollheim and expand its application to art in general. In so doing, we will uncover the ways in which the understanding of art relies upon the existence of a communal ideal of a “suitable spectator” which is cultivated on the grounds of a prepossessed common sense of taste of the sort discussed by Ludwig Wittgenstein and WATSUJI Tetsurō. The existence of common taste for its part not only informs our understanding of art but also explains why art has the ability to open up new worlds to us through the presentation of new ways of structuring our interpretations of the world, as mentioned by Mikel Dufrenne. Finally, some brief remarks can be made about the interplay of subjectivity and objectivity inherent in both art and morality.

II. Preliminary remarks on evaluating and interpreting art

One of the more ordinary sorts of aesthetic evaluations that can be made is “this is beautiful.” What is interesting about this evaluation is what it leaves out. Compare, “this is beautiful *to me*.” Why do we ordinarily feel that we can omit the relativizing clause “to me”? One thing to note about the dropping of the relativizing clause is that if we did not do so, there would be no basis whatsoever for aesthetic disputes: “This is beautiful to me. Is it beautiful to you? No? Oh well.” In order for us to have a sustained dialogue about art or an aesthetic evaluation, we cannot merely make claims about our own dispositions, nor can we make claims that hold for everyone (since the claim “this is beautiful to everyone” must be abandoned as soon as one philistine in the audience says, “not to me”), but rather we must instead make claims that somehow bring our personal reac-

tions out of ourselves and into the realm of public discourse, and, preferably if we are to make any headway towards conclusions, *rational* discourse without making merely sociological observations about the state of public taste.¹

III. The “Artworld”

Arthur Danto in “The Appreciation and Interpretation of Works of Art” remarks that taste is, “the paradigm of what cannot be rationally be disputed.”² Nevertheless, in “The Artworld,” he claims that it is a necessary condition of art that at least some of the physical aspects of an artwork be identified as representing something, which seems on the surface at least to be the sort of thing that can be rationally deliberated over.³ That is, in a painting, a white spot of paint might represent Icarus, or—in a particularly avant-garde piece—a white spot of paint. The key is that the spot of paint is not only a spot of paint, but also a potential object of public interpretation, even if it is interpreted as standing for itself. Hence, we can point at the spot and say (correctly), “This is Icarus,” in spite of the fact that Icarus is a fictitious person, and not a spot of paint at all. When evaluating a work of art, the meaning of the word “is” is temporarily relaxed, so that it means, “represents,” rather than “is identical to” or “is an instance of.” Strictly speaking, there is nothing to see in the work itself that allows us to identify what it is that a painting represents, since a sufficiently idiosyncratic artist may represent anything with anything else (whether or not it is a good idea to attempt to do so).⁴ Similarly, the painting has nothing on it that identifies it as an artwork. The key is that one must master, “the *is of artistic identification* and so constitute it a work of art,” since without doing so one “will never look upon artworks.”⁵ Laying aside the question of whether this is in fact the *sine qua non*

¹ Compare Komar and Melamid’s (possibly satirical?) project *The People’s Choice* in which the “most wanted” and “least wanted” paintings and songs were created by polling people’s preferences via survey. The results are predictably awful.

² “Appreciation and Interpretation,” p. 35.

³ “Artworld,” p. 30.

⁴ One thinks particularly here of Barnett Newman, whose paintings have titles like *Adam*, *Eve*, and *The Stations of the Cross* in spite of being color-fields with a few lonely vertical “zips” on which to hang an interpretation.

of art, we are left with the question of how this artistic identification is performed. Danto points to a theory of art as the repository of meaning:

What in the end makes the difference between a Brillo box and a work of art consisting of a Brillo Box is a certain theory of art. It is the theory that takes it up into the world of art, and keeps it from collapsing into the real object which it is [...]. [...] It is the role of artistic theories [...] to make the Artworld, and art, possible.⁶

Theories of art in turn are taken up by the “Artworld”—a term never precisely defined by Danto, but which one can take to be the community of artists and art critics that produce “an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art”⁷—in different ways at different times such that new and different physically observable predicates are made artistically relevant according to the fashion of the time and the contingent, historical evolution of art theories.

While Danto’s theory of art seems initially plausible since it explains how aesthetic predicates can emerge as a matter of communal interest, it leaves much to be desired. On the romantic side, it might be complained that his theory is little different from the cynical aphorism sometimes attributed to his artistic hero Andy Warhol: “Art is what you can get away with.” Danto does hold out hope that art may serve as “as a mirror held up to nature” and “catch the conscience of our kings,” but he gives little explanation of how this is to occur.⁸ Presumably, Danto trusts that so long as the Artworld is functioning properly, the predicates it picks out as being aesthetically relevant will be ones that further this aim. A more troubling complaint against Danto’s theory stemming from this is that he does little to explain who the members of the Artworld are, and how they decide which predicates to make artistically relevant. Several philosophers have attempted to trace the emergence of the Artworld historically or explain how “being a work of art” can be a meaningful predicate in the face of the changing nature of

⁵. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁶. *Ibid.*, p. 32. Inconsistent capitalization of “Brillo box” in the original.

⁷. *Ibid.*

⁸. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

the Artworld,⁹ but we should notice that Danto himself places theories in a position of priority over both art and the Artworld. That is, the Artworld itself is constituted by theories about what the Artworld is. The risk of circularity here seems to be high, though it is somewhat mitigated by the historicity of the object of investigation. That is to say, for historically evolving entities, we can accept a higher degree of circularity than usual as being non-vicious, since it can be said that the relevant aspects of the entity emerged at first vaguely and only successively became refined over the years.

However, in the fields of interpreting and evaluating a work of art, there is a simpler means of escaping regress: we can say that a work means what its creator says it means. This theory has the advantage of already being appealed to non-systematically in ordinary discussions of art by non-specialists.¹⁰ It is normal when considering a work to ask whether the artist intended for it to be taken in a certain way. Furthermore, as an act of public expression, an artwork is a means for one human being or group of human beings to communicate, however obliquely, with others, and as such we are morally obliged to listen to what the authorial voice is trying to say unless some other consideration intervenes to nullify that obligation.¹¹ Indeed, in “Appreciation and Interpretation” Danto seems to have modified his theory to make clearer the intrinsic link between the work and the artist. He explains, “As interpretation is inseparable from work, it is inseparable from the artist if it is the artist’s work.”¹² Nevertheless, Danto resisted the move to considering the artist’s intention as foundational. The artist is, like the interpretation and

⁹ Notably Jerrold Levinson in “Defining Art Historically” and George Dickie in “The New Institutional Theory of Art.”

¹⁰ For instance, when J. K. Rowling casually remarked, “Dumbledore is gay, actually,” at a book reading, it was taken without question to be a canonical part of the Harry Potter universe by her fans. Rowling’s telling us that her character is gay settled the matter of his being gay as far as the public was concerned—regardless of the content of the novels themselves. See <<http://www.newsweek.com/id/50787>>.

¹¹ Examples of some considerations that might nullify our obligation to listen to the artist are artists whose message is evil or artists who abuse their position as speakers. In addition, since not all messages are equally urgent, it is not necessary to engage with all of them. Still, it is a minor moral breach to critically evaluate a work without giving any serious thought to the author if it is the author who presented it for evaluation.

¹² “Appreciation and Interpretation,” p. 45.

the theory that makes the work a work, an irreducible part of the work, but still not the final arbiter of the work. No doubt one motivation for not using the artist's intention to circumvent the circularity problem is that there are great dangers in availing ourselves of the author's intention: just using the criteria of the author may mean that no work is a failure, or it may strip the critic of her ability to judge a work independently. In addition, since the intentions of the author may be unclear, it may make definitive judgment impossible, since it depends on the private thoughts of the artist. Further, we are prohibited from creatively interpreting a work in ways that the author had not foreseen. Indeed, this is no small loss for the evaluation of work, since one not infrequently finds meanings and resonances in an artwork that the original author may not have been consciously aware of.

Of course, the Artworld-theory itself is vulnerable to the criticism that it stymies the evaluative process, since Danto seems to accept the claim that any object—no matter how aesthetically inert¹³—can be taken up by the Artworld as an art object if the Artworld so chooses. Since the only criterion of art is the Artworld's fickle interest, Danto's theory risks collapsing into the nothing more than the sociology of the art scene elite. What is needed is a means of evaluation that skillfully melds the deference to the author of the intentionalist theory and the independence of the Artworld into a unified whole that still respects the work of art as a work.

IV. The "Suitable spectator"

To settle this standoff between the objective but elusive and vague Artworld and the subjective but undemanding and unknowable author, Richard Wollheim introduces "the suitable spectator" as an intersubjective mediator. In "On Pictorial Representation," he explains that a work must be evaluated not as it would be by the uneducated—for whom a spot of paint is a spot of paint—nor as it might be by its creator—for whom the spot

¹³ One particularly thinks here of Duchamp's *Fountain*, the aesthetic inadequacies of which are taken up at length in "Appreciation and Interpretation."

might contain an unknowable myriad of associations—but as it would be by the suitable spectator. Wollheim defines the suitable spectator as, “a spectator who is suitably sensitive, suitably informed, and, if necessary, suitably prompted.”¹⁴

The relevance of the suitable spectator to the interpretation and evaluation of art is that if a picture represents something then such a spectator will, under the right conditions, have a visual experience which determines that the picture represents something. (Wollheim’s theory is concerned primarily with visual art, but can easily be expanded to encompass other forms of art as well.) Wollheim goes on to emphasize that the experience of representational meaning is primarily a perceptual activity, not an interpretive one. The experience of representational meaning is not a matter of applying rules to a surface which “will take [one], without any help from perception, to the thought of what is represented [...]”¹⁵ Rather, it is in the experience of perception of meaning itself that we encounter meaning. When suitably prepared, the viewer is able, by means of “a special perceptual skill, called ‘seeing-in’”¹⁶ to see the white spot as Icarus with complete ease. Indeed, the conscious application of rules of interpretation proposed by some theories are actually a sign of the lack of ease of a novice interpreter. In the field of hermeneutics, it is only the non-native speaker or the confused native who must consciously apply the rules of grammar in order to reach the meaning of the text. When one understands a text natively, its meaning is what it says. The text is perceived as meaning. In this same way, the suitable spectator that Wollheim proposes can be thought of a kind of “native speaker” for whom the visual image transparently is what it represents. Danto’s “is of artistic identification” becomes a core part of the perceptual apparatus of the well prepared viewer.

¹⁴ Wollheim, p. 396.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 397.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 400.

But how does the introduction of the suitable spectator help us to defuse the tension between the Artworld and the author's intention? Wollheim explains that the key is that what makes the spectator suitable is that the spectator has,

the sensitivity, the information, the prompting, that are required if the spectator is to see the picture as the artist desires him to.

However, there has also been an advantage in putting the matter as I have had to: that is, in terms of what the suitable spectator sees rather than that of the artist's intentions. For it has made it clear why, for some representations, there will be no appropriate experience. Such an experience will elude even the suitable spectator because the artist failed to make a work that can be experienced in a way that tallies with the intentions that he undoubtedly had. [...]

Representational meaning [...] is [...] dependent, not only on intention as such, but on fulfilled intention.¹⁷

By interpolating the figure of the suitable spectator, we are given a middle ground from which to judge a work and the criterion of that judgment. The criterion is whether the work can induce an experience, and the middle ground is the consciousness of the spectator. Works which succeed in producing the desired state in the proper observer are evaluated positively, and those that fail are evaluated negatively. Furthermore, the observer has the space to draw out reactions to the work that the author did not consider, since it is the observer, not the author, whose viewpoint is privileged. Thus, the viewpoint of the suitable spectator is clearly superior to that of the artist's intention alone as a theoretical standpoint for aesthetic evaluation.

Yet we must also consider how this differs from the Artworld-theory itself. One difficulty with the Artworld-theory is that the Artworld is supposed to be a unified body of expert thought. However, it is clear that even granting the otherwise difficult process of specifying the membership of that body and presupposing the unity of its judgments in an instant of time, if not over time, one is still left with the problem that different works clearly deserve different standards of appreciation. If, as Danto says, an artwork is constituted in part by the theory that makes it an artwork at all, then one must suppose that the artwork travels with the entire Artworld on its back. By proposing instead a

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 404.

theory of a suitable spectator, we can lighten the load of the work down to just the one sort of spectator envisioned by the artist without thereby ceding to the artist final say about the appraisal of the work. The artist can tell us how to look at the work but cannot presume to tell us what we see. At the same time, the nagging question of possible circularity in our definition is disposed of. In Artworld theory, the theory makes the work and the Artworld, but the theory also depends on the Artworld for its existence. On the other hand, the suitable spectator originates as a part of the work solely from the artist's intention to make a work suitable for someone else to experience.

One illustration of the concept of the judgment of the suitable spectator overruling that of the author can be seen in *Records of Kyorai* (去來抄), a collection of poems and observations by a pupil of the haiku master Bashō (芭蕉). In one incident, dispute arises about the proper interpretation of Kyorai's poem, "On the edge of this rock, / Here is one more / Moon-viewer":

Kyorai said, "Shadō asserted that this must be a monkey, but what I intend is another person." Bashō retorted, "A monkey! What does he mean? What were you thinking when you composed the poem?" Kyorai answered, "As I was walking over the fields and mountains, singing under the light of the full moon, I found, on the edge of a rock, another man filled with poetical excitement." Bashō said, "In the phrase, 'There is one more person,' you announce yourself; in this there is poetry. [...] My poetical taste is below the highest, but in Bashō's interpretation, there is something fantastic, I think."¹⁸

About this incident, the translator R.H. Blyth remarks, "we have here the entertaining picture of Bashō telling Kyorai, not what he ought to have said, but what he ought to have meant by what he said."¹⁹ Why is Bashō's interpretation preferred over Kyorai's? Because as the master of Kyorai, Bashō is in a position to offer an authoritative interpretation of Kyorai's work. Through a lifetime of training, Bashō has made himself able to instantly size up the merits of a haiku. At the same time, one of the reasons that it is Bashō and not someone else who is in that position is that Kyorai as the author had

¹⁸ Blyth, p. 343.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

always intended for the poem to be evaluated for someone with the degree of insight that he considered his master to have. Thus, as an author, Kyorai has the authority to invest Bashō with a claim to the authoritative interpretation.

Still, there remain numerous grounds for disputing the suitable spectator theory. Among other problems, it remains to be seen if we have not merely doubled the amount of work to be done as part of an evaluation. Whereas before we needed only to interpret the work, now we must first suss out the suitable spectator and only then can we begin to examine our perceptions to see what meanings they see in the work. It similarly doubles the grounds for conflict when we have conflicting evaluations. Perhaps our opponent is perceiving something different in the work, or perhaps one of us has not fully taken up the mindset of a suitable spectator. To construct a conception of the suitable spectator in an adequate way, we need to share with the artist an understanding of what a suitable spectator would look like. Sharing a conception of the suitable spectator with the artist will in turn rely on our having a common understanding with the artist of what kind of thing art is and how it is to be evaluated. Furthermore, in those cases where our sense of the relevant spectator diverges from our sense of ourselves, we must change ourselves in order to become more suitable to serve as evaluators. Accordingly, to understand what sort of person a suitable spectator is we must first examine more closely the common ground that we already share with the artist, and then we must examine the means by which can cause our tastes to conform more closely to the ideal of suitability.

V. Common taste

When thinking about any philosophical problem, it is helpful to use a concrete case as the focal point for one's investigations. In the field of taste, the early twentieth century Japanese philosopher WATSUJI Tetsurō (和辻哲郎) is a very helpful example of this practice. In his book *Ethics*, when considering the problem of commonly held values, he turns

to the physical sense of the taste of food as an illustration of the ways an otherwise private sensation can nevertheless be the basis for a public dialogue:

[W]e taste food by dividing it among us. Its taste depends on each person's peculiar sense of taste. In spite of this, is it true to say that tastes differ from one to another? Do we not enjoy the same sweetness when we taste sugar, dividing it among us? If one person tastes sugar and finds it bitter, we would lose no time in finding her a medical care on the assumption that she is sick. We attempt to deal with her as a person who is normally able to taste the same sweetness, although she is temporarily deprived of this ability. Based on the phenomenon that people experience the same taste, "communal eating," has played an important role since ancient times. [...] If it were true that bodily feelings separate people from one another, then such instances could not have occurred.²⁰

Although, the sensation of tasting food is private, there is nevertheless a degree to which the phenomenon of tasting can only be understood in relation to certain social assumptions about the nature of tasting food. Though we may say that only I know what the food tastes like to me, nevertheless, what the food tastes like to me is intimately bound up with what the food tastes like to others. The very language I use to describe my sensation is based on the assumption of a literally common taste shared between individuals. The invisible object of my sense of taste is made visible through my interactions with others. Certain baseline concerns are the ground of shared ways of life, and through sharing these concerns with others, we are able to communicate with them.

Ludwig Wittgenstein makes a similar argument in his *Philosophical Investigations*, where he says, "If language is to be a means of communication there must be agreement not only in definitions but also (queer as this may sound) in judgments."²¹ Communication presupposes a common language, which of course necessitates the sharing of terms. But since terms are not isolated in their meanings, the very use of a common language presupposes such judgments as "sugar is sweet"; "salt is salty"; etc., since "sweet" is the name of the kind of taste that sugar has, and likewise for salty and salt. In the aesthetic realm, we share a love for harmonious chords and sense of frisson from paintings with sharp lines and garish colors. Moreover, even complex tastes such as the old Japanese

²⁰. Watusji, pp. 75–76.

²¹. *Philosophical Investigations*, §242.

love of *wabi-sabi* or the 1950s New York art scene's love of conceptuality can form the backbone of a sense of common taste shared by a collection of people.

To give another example of the phenomenon of common preferences explained by Watsuji and Wittgenstein, consider fashion. Wittgenstein asks,

How does fashion come about? Say, we wear lapels broader than last year. Does this mean the tailors like them better broader? No, not necessarily. He cuts it like this and this year he makes it broader.²²

It is clear that what makes a fashion the fashion of the moment is not the taste of any individual, be it the taylor or the trendsetter. Rather, what is in fashion is created through the decisions of many people each of whom influences others. To state "this style is in fashion" is not to make a claim that "I like this style," "the tailors like this style," or even "one should like the style." It is a statement about the mass. As Watsuji explains it is an illustration of the communal consciousness:

What makes this communal consciousness manifest in a particularly bold form, is the phenomenon of "fashion." Fashion makes its appearance within the modes of clothing, food, and housing already historically and nationally fixed as more detailed common favorites. Even though individuals did not, to begin with, become conscious of a common favorite as their own, nevertheless, they do feel it to be their own favorite to the extent that they are inclined to view deviations from this favorite as either something funny or ugly.²³

We all demonstrate our allegiance to the common taste of our cultures each morning when we put on our clothes for the day and choose something appropriate for contemporary Western culture rather than a comfortable kimono or a Roman tunic—and not because of any external compulsion but because of a personal preference. Without any individual awareness of the process, the favorite of the group becomes the favorite of the individual as well. This process does not subvert the fact of individual autonomy of fashion preferences, but does demonstrate the degree to which tastes occur within a social fabric. The social fabric, in turn, demonstrates the wanderings of collective feeling.

²². "Lectures on Aesthetics," I. 8 (p. 13).

²³. Watsuji, pp. 74–75.

The realm of the aesthetic is only possible to the degree that individuals in a society do in fact make up an "Artworld." This Artworld does not consist of isolated theorists who examine a work of art solely on the basis of the theory du jour as in Danto's description but of real people in a common culture with similar values and a shared way of life who examine a work of art with uncountably many invisible social pressures affecting their perception. It because we are already in communication with the artist as fellow members of a society that we can understand anything that they say, whether verbally or artistically. Only once communication is established on the basis of what is shared between ourselves and the artist are we able to adequately understand the suitable spectators inherent in the work.

There are however two caveats that need to be made about the realm of common taste. The first is that common taste is not an absolute monolith. Rather, we are all members of a number of different overlapping communities and sub-communities which share some commitments but diverge in others. One difficulty for contemporary art theorists is that the standard of taste has become so fragmented into different sub-categories that it is nearly impossible to approach a work and assume that one automatically shares with the author the cultural background necessary to evaluate it.

The other major difficulty is that situations also arise in which we are able to understand on the basis of our sense of common taste with the artist what the suitable spectator specific to a work would be, but we are nevertheless aware of our inadequacy as spectators. If we find the sugar to be salty, or *wabi-sabi* to be merely dilapidated, or the Pop Art to be overly intellectual, then we will be unable to treat the artist's work with due respect. In those situations, specific steps must be undertaken to improve our suitability, which will be considered next.

VI. The artist's life as a key to common taste

Since common taste varies from community to community, more needs to be said about how we can know what the suitable spectator is like for a given work. One key consideration is that, where possible, we need to look at the life of the artist as a clue to the work. Maurice Merleau-Ponty does just this in "Cézanne's Doubt." There, Merleau-Ponty gives a deep explanation of Cézanne's work on the basis of Cézanne's life. This is possible because, as Merleau-Ponty writes,

If Cézanne's life seems to us to carry the seeds of his work within it, it is because we get to know his work first and see the circumstances of his life through it, charging them with a meaning borrowed from that work. [...]

Although it is certain that a person's life does not *explain* his work, it is equally certain that the two are connected. The truth is that *that work to be done called for that life*.²⁴

The work of the artist and the life of the artist are products of the same hands, as such by understanding the one, we refine our understanding of the other, since what we perceive in it will be affected by what we have already perceived in the other. From the work we get clues as to the styles, genres, and traditions that interested the artist, and from the life we see how the artist responded to those traditions in a lived fashion. The two avenues of understanding complement one another without either one being fully dominant, though the portion of influence among the two may vary from genre to genre.²⁵ Since we are able to share a way of life with the artist, we can by means of a way of life as form of common taste begin to see things from the perspective, not of the artist, but of the spectator for whom the artist had been crafting her work all along.

Even in the case of the joint work or the work whose authorship is unclear, the way of life shared by the community that produces the art is going to be a key to our under-

²⁴ Merleau-Ponty, p. 70.

²⁵ For example, for most philosophy, it is sufficient to assume that the author lived the life of a scholar in order to understand her work, but for special cases, such as Nietzsche or Kierkegaard, a knowledge of the life is indispensable to the understanding. On the other hand, twentieth century paintings are scarcely intelligible without a knowledge of the artist's life, except in cases of commercial art. For any work, however, the deeper one draws from it, the less adequately one can judge on the basis of a vague sense of what a normal sort of life would be and the more a concrete knowledge of the life is necessary.

standing of the work. Even if we cannot point to a genius like Cézanne as the guide to understanding a work, nevertheless, we can look at the culture in which the work emerged and use the life of that culture as a clue to what kind of spectator would be suitable for the work.²⁶

VII. Becoming a suitable spectator

Kant in *The Critique of Judgment* gives an extended explanation of the means by which the judgment of a neophyte artist is trained. Although it concerns the training of an artist rather than an observer, it is worth excerpting at length here in order to make several points about the means by which we arrive at common tastes without thereby losing our individual perspectives:

So in fine arts there is only *manner*, not *method*: the master must show by his example what the student is to produce, and how. He may in the end bring his procedure under universal rules, but these are more likely to be useful to the student as occasional reminders of what the main features of the procedure are, than as prescriptions of these features. And yet the artist must bear in mind a certain ideal; art must keep this ideal in view even though in practice it never achieves it in full. The master must stimulate the student's imagination until it becomes commensurate with a given concept; [...] For only in this way can the master keep the student from immediately treating the examples offered him as if they were archetypes, models that he should imitate as if they were not subject to a still higher standard and to his own judgment [...].²⁷

Education in the fine arts can teach only the manner of an artist, because there is no rigid method to be followed. The student does not merely imitate the teacher but learns the underlying universal rules through the particular works. In these cases, it is important for the teacher to emphasize that since the underlying rules are "ideals" (in the high Kantian sense), they are not (and cannot be) actually found in the copying of the work. If not well instructed, the student may copy the originals without seeing why they are important at all. Thus, the propaedeutic goal of fine art education is the production of

²⁶ The topic of the aesthetics of nature is too broad to go into here, but I will suggest that when considering nature we have the option of either considering it in the way that some culture already considers a suitable way or creating a new way of looking at nature and attempting to share it with other members of our culture. The danger here however is that by creating one's own way of looking at nature, one will not be able to see anything other than what one is expecting to see.

²⁷ Kant, §60, p. 355 (traditional pagination).

mental powers suitable for understanding the humanities, in order to feel sympathy and communicate in the social spirit of humankind, and this goal is common for the observer as well as the artist. What allows communication between the two is that they are able to listen to the same artistic language. The author is obliged to craft the work with consideration for the attention of the spectator, and if this is done, then the spectator is obliged to return this consideration.

To return to the example of Bashō, it was his lifetime of experience with Japanese and Chinese literature, art, and religion which made him able to serve both as an author and as a suitable spectator. Bashō lived a life that revolved around literature to such a degree that after he wrote in *The Narrow Road to Oku*, “Many of the men of old died on the road, and I too for years past have been stirred by the sight of a solitary cloud drifting with the wind to ceaseless thoughts of roaming,”²⁸ he too joined his forebears by passing away in Ōsaka in the midst of a journey and writing, “Sick on a journey, / my dreams wander / the withered fields.”²⁹ When one is as properly trained as Bashō then “There is nothing you can see that is not a flower; There is nothing you can think that is not the moon.”³⁰ Yet, as Bashō said the key skill for one in possession of this background is to “seek not after the ancients; seek what they sought!”³¹ The suitable spectator cultivates an understanding of the rules by studying the classics of a genre, but the spectator never becomes a slave to the canon or the rules, but to the organic impulse that animated the life. As Bashō said elsewhere, “Abide by the rules, then throw them overboard, and for the first time you will achieve freedom.”³² Achieving suitability as a spectator means not only becoming familiar with the works of the past, but inhabiting the theoretical and lived structures that animated past Artworlds. The works of the past are not taken as objects to

²⁸. Bashō, p. 19.

²⁹. Hass, p. 54.

³⁰. Blyth, p. 237.

³¹. My translation of “古人の跡を求めず、古人の求めたるの所を求めよ” from “Words by a Brushwood Gate” (柴門の辭) and quoted in Blyth, p. 292.

³². Blyth, p. 236.

be blindly copied, but as the means by which one may become aware of the mindset and lifestyle of the suitable spectator and artist: the common taste of another world. The suitable spectator is not suitable because that spectator blindly agrees with the judgments of the artist, but because the spectator is willing to undertake the living work necessary to prepare her faculties of judgment so as to receive the work in its fullest as something more than could be imagined in advance by the artist or the spectator.

VIII. Exploring new worlds

What is fascinating about art at its best is that in observing the work and entering into the position of the suitable spectator, we find that we also enter into a “new world.” Mikel Dufrenne in “The World of the Aesthetic Object” illustrates the sense of world which the suitable spectator can encounter in a piece by explaining that,

In the presence of the Winged Victory, we are at first aware of an animated atmosphere of wind and of upward movement, creating a space which is that of taking flight and which has the dimensions of an ethereal world.³³

The reason it is possible for an object like the Winged Victory of Samothrace to so transport us is that by its presence, it draws us into the world of its creators, and it allows us to attempt to perceive the work not only as they perceived it but also as the kind of spectators that have inherited the culture they established. Of course, the consideration of art objects created for reasons other than art is a particularly fraught area of evaluation. Nevertheless, a full appreciation of such works must consider what sort of spectator would have been deemed suitable by the original creators of the work in addition to what sort of spectator is currently deemed suitable by the art criticism community if one’s evaluation of the work is to be properly deferential to the original creators of the work. Thus, while we may not need to treat the Winged Victory as a religious totem in order to partially appreciate it, a full appreciation of the work needs to take into account the religious feelings and lived actions of its creators. While we need not hail goddess

³³ Dufrenne, p. 139.

Niké, we must understand the ways in which her embodiment is meant to transport us into another, ethereal, even divine world.

To be sure, we must resist the temptation to put too much emphasis on the powers of the object alone to invoke an experience. Dufrenne himself seems to fall into this temptation, when he writes, "It is the *work* which expresses."³⁴ Properly speaking, it is the author who expresses herself in the work and not the work itself which speaks, but this attribution of agency to the work is not without its reasons. Human beings as aesthetic creatures are naturally drawn to sympathetically interpret the works they encounter, and when one suitably views a work, the work itself becomes transparent, which allows one to overlook the contributions made as a viewer to the experience of the work. Accordingly, as Dufrenne states,

Expression thus establishes a singular world. It is not the unity of a perceivable space, of an addable sum; it is not a unity which can be grasped from the outside, surveyed, and defined. It proceeds from an internal cohesion which is amenable only to the logic of feeling.³⁵

When we engage with a great work, it is as though we were able to enter into a world where sugar is salty and salt is sweet, and not arbitrarily so but as a natural, organic whole. There is a coherence to the logic of the judgments that underlie the world in spite of the difference of those judgments from those that underlie the ordinary world to which we are accustomed. The coherence of this world is not the result of a rationally definable calculation, but something that we perceive in the work as a result of becoming a suitable spectator for that work. As Dufrenne also notes, this world gains its cogency in part from the degree to which the work itself suggests rather than reveals. Since not everything about the world of the work is disclosed by the work, the spectator is able to play inside of a space with "potentiality which no actualization can exhaust."³⁶

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

IX. Moral imaginative resistance to becoming a suitable spectator

Thinking about the work as a means of exploring worlds also helps explain the problem of “imaginative resistance” to morally repellent artworks. While we freely allow ourselves to engage with fictional works in which the rules of physics are altered or improbable events happen with great frequency, we have a certain distaste for engaging with works that require us to see them from a different moral standpoint. As David Hume notes in “Of the Standard of Taste,”

Must we throw aside the pictures of our ancestors because of their ruffs and farthingales? [No.] But where the ideas of morality and decency alter from one age to another, and where vicious manners are described, without being marked with the proper characters of blame and disapprobation, this must be allowed to disfigure the poem, and to be a real deformity.³⁷

That is, we allow for the world of the work to be archaic or fantastical, but we cannot praise a work that fully embraces a repugnant point of view.³⁸ Why should a moral defect count as an aesthetic defect as well? Because in order to engage with a work, we must take on the standards of its suitable spectator, but the suitable spectator for certain works is the kind of person we must not allow ourselves to become, even in play, since accustoming oneself to evil in certain ways has a deleterious effect on one’s character. We can temporarily allow ourselves to think of ruffs and farthingales as sartorially appropriate without damaging our moral faculties (although an over-familiarity with paintings of the past *may* give one a greater taste for outmoded fashions), but to think of genocide as appropriate, for example, even temporarily is a danger to the integrity of our future moral judgments. Indeed, to fully become “suitable” for such viewpoint, we may even need to change our way of life as a way of changing our common taste—an action many of us would, I hope, resist. Thus, when the artist invites us to explore the world of the work, they are making a demand of the audience that cannot be reasonably fulfilled.

³⁷ Hume, “Of the Standard of Taste,” p. 76–77 of Mothersill and pp. 226–249 of *Of the Standard of Taste and Other Essays*.

³⁸ Note that merely depicting evil acts or an evil character’s point of view is not enough to aesthetically mar a work. To be an aesthetic failure, the artist must create a work the suitable spectator of which is evil.

When the audience (naturally and commendably) resists the work more than the artist intended, the artist's intention is foiled and the work cannot be considered a complete success, since the artist failed to account for the imaginative resistance of the audience.

Of course, in the opposite vein, we can imagine an artist who creates a work that she intends for her spectator to resist and reject as evil.³⁹ In that case, the work would be judged a successful fulfillment of the artist's intentions. In both cases though, we see that our moral evaluation of a work may have bearing on our ability to make an aesthetic evaluation of the work. What is interesting about this is that in the case of both aesthetic evaluations and moral evaluations what must be done is the bridging of the subjective sense of how I or the other feels and the objective facts about the work or action into a synthetic inter-subjective sense of what kinds of values inhere in the worldview that one must take on in relation to another person in order to understand the world from a suitable viewpoint.

X. Disputing taste and objections

To return to our motivating impulse, how are disputes about taste to be resolved? I propose a method roughly similar to the following: First, on the basis of knowledge about the circumstances of the production of the work to be evaluated, infer what sort of spectator would be suitable to view the work in question. Second, do what is necessary to become such a spectator. (This may involve developing one's senses, becoming familiar with a canon, engaging with many similar works, prompting oneself in a certain way, or, in extreme cases, changing one's style of life or values, etc.) Third, experience the work from the vantage point of the suitable spectator and see what sort of aesthetic experiences can be produced by the work. Fourth, evaluate the work on the basis of its achievement of the artist's aims and on the basis of the aesthetic reward it offers in its propensity to open a world. Finally, it may be necessary on the basis of what is revealed

³⁹ One thinks here of the "Sensation" exhibit from the collection of Charles Saatchi in the late 1990s, which was designed deliberately ("transgressively") to provoke its viewers outrage.

by the prior evaluation of the work to revise one's view of suitable spectator for the work by returning to the first step, reevaluating the life of the artist, reengaging in the cultivation of suitability as spectator, and iteratively continuing the process of evaluation indefinitely. Hence the declaration, "this is beautiful," can be taken to mean something like, "this will be seen as beautiful should one approach it in a suitable manner."

To fill out this outline some clarifications must be made about the nature of the suitable spectator. While I am appropriating the term "spectator" from Wollheim and occasionally use the word "see" to describe how the spectator's experiences the work, do not think that the spectator must always be passive or disengaged from a work. For some works, it may be vital that the "spectator" participate in the creation of the work in order to suitably understand it. Think for instance of tea ceremony, in which the spectator must literally participate in the ceremony along with the tea master. (This case in particular also points out that a difficult process may be involved in training one's suitability as a spectator, since even participating in a tea ceremony requires extensive training.) Similarly, many kinds of improvisational musical performance require the audience's participation in order to decide the direction the music will take.

It may also be objected that in some cases there is no single clear position for a spectator to take in regards to a work. Think for instance of the writer who does not particularly care if his work is published and does not write with any particular audience in mind. Nevertheless, I will argue in this case that so long as the writer employs existing languages for the work, the writer will have some idea of what sort of person would be suitable to read the work: one literate in the relevant languages and able to grasp the appropriate connections between the work written and other works alluded to or otherwise relevant to its appreciation. If the writer is only writing for herself, then to become suitable, we must understand what kind of person the writer herself is.

It should also be understood by now that the selection of the suitable spectator for a work by the artist is not a means of "critic-proofing"⁴⁰ the work. First, it is possible

for a work to fail to cause the spectator to experience what the artist intended that she experience. Second, great works are those that lend themselves to the experience of a rich and deep world. A Hollywood action blockbuster movie may set out to be viewed as no more than an amusing diversion. In that case, it is to be viewed from the perspective of the shallow spectacle-seeker. However, even if the movie succeeds from the point of view of its suitable spectator, this does not mean that the movie therefore becomes great art. At this point in our evaluation, we can only say that it is well-crafted. To be great, the work must not only reach the expectations of its spectators, but it must open up a rich and deep world that rewards those spectators aesthetically for their effort. Accordingly, it is wrong for the critic to complain that, say, *Independence Day* does not explore the human condition with the gravity of, say, *Citizen Kane*. However, it is proper for the critic to state that while crafted well enough for the concerns of its audience, *Independence Day* offers no real substance and dissolves into air should one attempt a serious analysis of the world it supposedly creates. As such, it is an inferior work.

To further clarify, suitability is not a binary concept, and for better works, there will not be just a single perspective which is suitable for understanding the work. Rather, a good work can be suitably understood from different perspectives in both a horizontal and vertical dimension. Horizontally speaking, a work like Plato's *Republic*⁴¹ has been well understood by persons from a variety of cultures from its origin in classical Greece to the modern day. In each of the cultures it has been taken up in, its interpretation has been subtly different and engaged with different concerns. Today, it is difficult to read the *Republic* without a sense for the tragedy of the totalitarian state, whereas Byzantine interpretations tended to be more concerned with relating the form of the good to the

⁴⁰. For a humorous but vulgar example of critic-proofing see <<http://www.penny-arcade.com/comic/2004/03/24/>>.

⁴¹. The *Republic* is an especially interesting work because of the difficulty of interpreting the level of irony intended by Plato. There is not space for a full exposition here, but a good theory of irony should show how a great work of irony is able to move spectators on different levels in different ways but appeal most strongly to the spectator who is able to pierce the ironic veil over the work.

Christian God. No matter the exact concerns that motivate the spectator taking up the work, however, the importance of the work is the way in which it causes its reader to engage its basic questions for herself. In this we see the vertical dimension of the *Republic*. As we read and reread it, new ironies and resonances are revealed to us. The language of the arguments becomes more clear, and we are better able to appreciate their stakes. Hence, Plato offers aesthetic and intellectual rewards to the tyro and the scholar alike. Indeed, one of the great qualities of the *Republic* is that it spurs tyros into scholarship and helps to create readers more suitable for it. (This is why the method listed above is iterative rather than linear.) The *most* suitable spectator for the *Republic* in all probability has not been born yet, and may not be born until the zenith of civilization should it ever occur. There are problems with the Romantic concept of genius, but what that concept gets right is that a great work can bring into being a new way of looking at art. Kant writes that genius allows us,

first, to discover ideas for a given concept, and, second, to hit upon the way of *expressing* these ideas that enables us to communicate to others, as accompanying a concept, the mental attunement that those ideas produce.⁴²

At its best, what the great work of art does is both to create a new way of seeing the world and to seduce us into seeing the world from this new perspective through the rewards it offers. On the other hand, the difficulty for a Hollywood action blockbuster is that its suitable spectator has a narrower vision of what will concern the audience rather than a wider one. The audience will only be concerned with the craft of the special effects, the intensity of the drama, and the spectacle of film. The audience will not be concerned by the believability of the motivations of the characters, the meaning of the film, its broader implications, etc. On the other side, an attempt to define great art as purely cerebral and unrelated to the virtuosity of the practice of craft will also fail, because that too is a diminution of what Danto called the “aesthetic predicates” of the work. In that case, the

⁴² Kant, §49, p. 317 (traditional pagination).

fact of the work's being sloppily made or deliberately ugly is not to be subject to evaluation either. However, the very best works are those which are able to be meaningfully engaged in as many ways as the audience is willing to become suitable to view.

XI. Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to present a means of bridging the divide between subjective and objective means of evaluating an artwork by means of cultivating one's capacities as the suitable spectator for a particular work and in so doing entering the world that is created by means of the work. The problem with just postulating an Artworld as the means of interpreting art is that the characteristics of the Artworld are ill-defined, and it leaves little ground for critical evaluation. At the same time, we cannot fall back blindly on the artist's own intentions. Rather, we find that each work calls for a certain suitable spectator to view a work, at which point the evaluation of the work is to be made on the basis of the perceptions of that viewer. Becoming a "suitable spectator" for a work begins on the ground of common taste but concludes through a deep familiarity with the artistic milieu and even lifestyle of the artist. Only by understanding both the theoretical and practical underpinnings of an artist's life can we have full understanding of that artist and begin to enter into a world that is truly different from our own. At the same time, however, while entering into other worlds is deeply rewarding, we must also be quite mindful of the dangers involved for our moral sense. This does not come about simply because we see bad things and copy them, but because in order to view the work properly, we have to change who we ourselves in some sense are.

Disputing taste is not a simple process, and there are many points in its practice that can become contested if not handled with extreme care. However, when it is well practiced, we can finally see why Danto held out the hope that art could act "as a mirror held up to nature" and "catch the conscience of our kings": through great art, we can make

ourselves suitable to see a new world and understand more clearly deficiencies about which we had theretofore been complacent in our own.

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