

# FALSE OBITS AND DASHED INTENSIONS: *The 'Death of the Artist' Revisited*

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Paolo Uccello, we know, had two great passions: animals and the laws of perspective. Does learning this shed light on his paintings? Do we feel that in his paintings for *The Miracle of the Desecrated Host* he has more interest in these elements than in the nominal religious subject matter? Whatever our judgement on this, my view is that this knowledge is at least *capable* of casting a particular light on Uccello's work because it is capable of revealing something of his intentions. These intentions matter, I suggest, because they constitute the meaning of the work of art. Thus, I suggest, that if Hieronymus Bosch had the intent to make whimsically, subversive, commentary on the state of Church doctrine in his time then that is what his works mean. If, on the other hand, he intended to reinforce a dour, sober, morality then *that* is what his works mean. The meaning of the work is determined by the intention of the artist.

## *1. The Position Stated*

Mostly, of course, we feel that the meaning of the work of art resides in the work itself and that we come to understand the work by paying close attention to it, rather than to any external cues. That is consistent with my thesis; a successful work of art is one in which there are no impediments caused by a lack of skill that stand between the artist and the realisation of the work. The work, therefore, will usually stand alone, able to be grasped by a sufficiently sympathetic viewer.

What if the artist has a confused or ambiguous intention in creating the work? Then that confused or ambiguous intention determines that

the meaning of the work is likewise confused or ambiguous. Thus Dostoyevsky claimed that Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot* was to be a completely good, or saintly, man. But the novel does not quite support such a view. The reason, I suggest, is that Dostoyevsky's motives were ambiguous in a way that he was not completely aware of. He thought that he was setting out to do X but was really doing X and Y. Indeed, it was precisely this complexity of motives that made him the great artist that he was.

This case also makes a second point: even if there is no ambiguity present we cannot take the artist's *statements* about his own intent as anything other than additional evidence as to what his intention was. Dostoyevsky may have been wrong about his own purposes or he may have claimed that they were one thing while knowing that they were another. Either way, what an artist says, or believes, can only be one more piece of evidence that we can take into account. So in saying that the artist's intention constitutes the meaning of the work I do not mean to assert that the artist must be taken as an infallible guide as to the meaning of the work. Nevertheless, under normal conditions what the artist says must not be overruled lightly. Though not infallible, an artist's beliefs about his own intention is very weighty evidence. Thus it would be folly simply to ignore Dostoyevsky's remarks about what he was trying to do.

The thesis that I am arguing for is a causal thesis. Intentions are causes that determine the nature of artistic works. Indeed the works would not exist were it not for the artist's intention to create them. Works are conceived and executed with particular ends in mind and it is this intention—or intentions, as they may change as the work progresses—that determine that the work of art be as it is.

Thus works of art, I claim, are a species of utterance. What someone means when they say something is determined by their intention; that intention is the cause of their saying what they did. Of course they may fumble what they want to say: their intention may have been to say 'April is the cruellest month', but instead they said 'April is the cruellest month.' Mistakes happen! A listener should try to determine what the speaker intended to say in the circumstance—*i.e.* what he or she meant. So it is with works of art. The meaning of the work is given by the artist's intention.

## 2. *The Alternative Views*

There are two views that are in opposition to the position that I have presented: *Formalism* and *Reader-Response Views*. Both see works of art as

having no intrinsic meaning that ties the work to the creative act of the artist. *Formalists* see the proper functioning of criticism as being the elucidation of purely formal, syntactic, relations that are within the work. In a painting this might be strictly compositional elements; in a poem it might be prosodic structures of metre and rhyme. A more liberal formalism might be prepared to pay attention to semantic structure—in a novel, for example, it is very hard to ignore—but still only that which is recoverable from the work itself, unaided by collateral biographical material.

The justification for this kind of view is often hard to discern. It is sometimes said that works of art must stand or fall on their merit—where that means on some very narrowly conceived merit of structure. It is also implied that in assessing the worth of the formal features of a work we are granting the autonomy of the critic's task—separating it from the more vulgar criteria of excellence that might be employed by ordinary viewers or readers.

With the passage of time *Formalism* seems also to partake of older, now discarded, philosophical views. It shares with Behaviourism a distaste for Mentalism; and it seems to have borrowed the 1930s enthusiasm for logic and mathematics—particularly proof-theoretic approaches to same. And we can see this same mathematisation of art works, particularly literary works, in the vogue for Structuralism from the 1950s onwards. But this effort to reduce works of art to either algebra or geometry was doomed to the narrow success allowed to limited ambition. For it is possible to discern *some* formal structural relations in anything and everything. Unless it is said why certain structures are more interesting and important than some others it is an entirely pointless activity.

But even if there had been some effort to argue that certain purely formal structures were desirable structures for a work to have, it would still not have been established that any work that had such a structure was necessarily good. Surely a novel could have the same formal properties as James' *Portrait of a Lady* and yet be a terrible novel. Surely a painting could have all the formal characteristics of Titian's *Bacchus and Ariadne* and yet be a bad painting. Having some particular formal properties is neither necessary nor sufficient for excellence.

The legacy of Formalism has been mainly a set of negative strictures, often couched in the language of logic to give them a spurious authority. Thus we still hear of the Biographical Fallacy, or the Intentional Fallacy, as though it were entirely obvious that these *are* fallacies—whereas the entire notion of a fallacy is rather problematic even in logic. Certainly, I think, there is nothing in Wimsatt and Beardsley's original article 'The

Intentional Fallacy' that could be taken to settle the matter—indeed the entire article simply begged the question on the point. It asserted over and over again what it wanted to prove, but it proved nothing.

(The reader can test the falsity of Wimsatt's and Beardsley's argument simply by taking every occurrence in their paper of the phrase 'literary text' or 'poem' and replacing it with 'utterance'. The idea that utterances could ever be divorced from the intentions of speakers, so that it is a *fallacy* to take what the person meant into account in understanding the utterance, is an absurdity that I doubt would be entertained anywhere.)

The second view that is opposed to the position that I am advocating here is the *Reader-Response* view: it also thinks that it is wrong to take into account collateral biographical information because art works lack intrinsic meaning—meaning is something that is supplied by the viewer. Once again, this is a causal thesis only now the causation goes from the art work to the viewer: it prompts the viewer or reader to interpret it, to give it a meaning that it, in itself, lacks. The art work has no meaning attached to it in virtue of being the creation of some artistic intent, so instead, any meaning that it has must be projected back onto it by different interpreters. They make of it what they will. In fact this is closer to the view that Wimsatt and Beardsley themselves held. They think that poems are orphaned at conception from their creators. Here is how they end their paper.

The poem is not the critic's own and not the author's. It is detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond his or her power to intend about or control it. The poem belongs to the public. It is embodied in language, the peculiar possession of the public, and it is about the human being, the object of public knowledge.

The argument here is as unconvincing as the rest of their paper, since it relies on a transparent equivocation. Language may be 'the peculiar possession of the people' but that does not mean that every utterance in that language is owned by them so that they can simply interpret every utterance at will. This is not true even in a limited sense. Suppose that some word reverses its meaning from Shakespeare's time to ours; that would not mean that we are free to foist that new meaning back onto Shakespeare's text.

It is not true in any sense that poems once written are separated from their author's. Legally, authors retain their copyright, or it is theirs to

trade. The meaning of the work remains what the author intended, in the language that they spoke. And so it is for all art works. If, over a long period of time, the public understanding of art becomes so debased that they see Giotto's Padua Chapel paintings as carrying secret messages of alien invasion that will not alter one iota what the paintings really mean.

Wimsatt and Beardley's article was influential partly because it shamelessly traded on a form of populism—a crude 'Power to the People'—but also because it mis-states a very harmless truth. That harmless truth is that audiences do, and inevitably will, have different interpretations of works of art. It is even true that new generations may interpret them afresh. But it does not follow from this, and it is not true, that those interpretations are a general free-for-all and that any interpretation is as good as any other. What constrains interpretations is that they are all attempts to get at what the author intended; they are best-guesses as to what the work *really* means. And that is why any interpretation that interprets a work in a way that the author *could not possibly* have intended will automatically be ruled out. No one will take seriously an interpretation of St Thomas Aquinas' *Summa* as a blueprint for constructing a UH-1M1 helicopter.

The astonishing influence of Wimsatt and Beardsley's article, and the consequent proliferation of various fallacies—biographical, intentional, genetic, *etc*—as constraints on the methodology of the critical arts could not have been successful were it not for an ill-understood feature of human psychology. It is well known that if you look at a face upside down you will see, after a few moments, another face, grotesque and repellent in its place. It is a little the same with Wimsatt and Beardsley's inversion of all sense. Only if you turn the truth upside down some people imagine that they see—not the false...but rather, a *higher* truth!

### 3. Professor Wollheim's View

In his paper 'Art, Interpretation, and Perception' Professor Wollheim also argues against the view that the interpretation of a work of art can be restricted by what is immediately perceptually present in it. We are entitled, he thinks, to draw upon our general cognitive stock in our efforts to understand a work. The goal of criticism, he thinks, is Retrieval of meaning, and not, as the Reader Response view would have it, Revision. On all of this we agree.

The point of divergence comes only at the end of the paper. Professor Wollheim argues that scrutinising a work of art—even with

the cognitive stock as large as it is able to be—cannot be sufficient for understanding that work. He objects to the idea that understanding a work of art is primarily an evidence-gathering activity: experience is essential. Thus he says

That the process of understanding a work of art—and here the natural contrast is with understanding an utterance or inscription—is essentially experiential is clearly recognised when we think that to change one’s mind about the meaning of a work of art simply on the basis of retailed evidence without perceptual return to the work is illegitimate. Reinterpretation of Cézanne’s early work requires that we go back and look at it again. Understanding a work of art is—I am saying—understanding by acquaintance. Why is this fact not merely unacknowledged but actually denied in most critical theory?

Philosophers will recognise this point as being very similar to that made by Frank Jackson’s Knowledge Argument in his famous paper ‘Epiphenomenal Qualia’ (*Philosophical Quarterly*, 32, 1982, 127–136). We can only know what the colour red is like by experiencing it—no amount of propositional knowledge will do. Professor Wollheim goes on to claim from this that, as a consequence, a literary work cannot be equivalent to a text, and presumably a painting cannot be equivalent to a painted canvas.

I have several critical remarks to make about this thesis.

(1) It is inappropriate to run a knowledge-by-acquaintance objection against the Scrutiny Thesis because that thesis already acknowledges the importance of acquaintance. Professor Wollheim construes the evidence-gathering of the Scrutiny Thesis too narrowly as an entirely cognitive activity; but it was always meant—and meant by him himself—as a perceptual thesis. The cognition was always intended to be necessary, not sufficient.

(2) It is not valid to argue—as Professor Wollheim does—that because we find in literary works particular properties—he says that a literary work might be ‘innovatory, full of hidden presences, ephemeral, cautious, cautionary’—that are not obviously properties of literary texts that these can’t be the same thing. Nor is the claim on which this is based true. For a text is not simply a semantic-less inscription—as even Professor Wollheim has been at pains to point out—and so it is false to claim that it cannot have all the properties that he believes are properties of literary works. It can be ‘haunted’, ‘cautionary’, etc. And if the literary *text* cannot

have these properties—if they are better thought of as descriptions of aspects of the reader’s response—then they cannot properly be said to be part of the literary *work*, either.

(3) If Professor Wollheim’s view entails—as I think it does—that a painting is something other than a painted canvas then I suggest that it is too much at variance with our ordinary usage to be understandable.

#### 4. *The Retrieval of Intention*

I conclude from this that the Scrutiny Thesis is correct after all. When we interpret works of art we are trying to recover the intention of its creator. And indeed an interpretation will be *good* insofar as it is in accord with what that intention was. But there is a problem that we must try to solve first: what do we say when there is not a single creator involved in making a work? How should we understand the meaning of the work in that circumstance?

The obvious case here is Film. A film is not the product of a single creative mind but the aggregation of the efforts of many. There is a writer, a director, a producer, a cinematographer, a set designer, a group of actors, a creator of the music score, and many others—and each of these roles may be filled with more than one artist. (On *Gone With the Wind*, for example, there was apparently a new writer every week—and every writer in Hollywood took a turn; there were also several directors, as George Cukor, the original director, was fired.) In fact we can see the *Auteur Theory* as an attempt to simplify this situation by insisting that the real author of a film is the director—a solution that has always dramatically short-changed writers and that ill-fits the hack role of many working directors.

But even with very traditional art forms there are frequently several individuals who make creative contributions: with novels there are editors; with painting and sculpture there are patrons; and always there is the possibility of advice-givers strewn along the creative path. What are we to say about this—does it not mean that there is no intention that creates works of Art?

I suggest that we see intentions as vector-like and therefore capable of being summed. An intention is really a direction that will be given to the ensuing action; thus, even with a single contributor, there is a multitude of secondary intentions that follow from the primary shaping intention. Other contributors add in their own shaping intentions, usually to

some much smaller degree. Moreover determining these other factors is exactly what good critics try to do. Thus when it was learned that Raymond Carver's first editor had played an inordinately large role in shaping that author's spare, artless, style, it was taken to be a significant point about the meaning of those early stories; Carver's original meaning had in some cases been rendered unrecognisable by editorial intervention. Similarly, critics are usually quite interested in trying to factor influences from tradition on a certain painter's style; or understanding the contributions made to an orchestral performance by the score, the soloist, the conductor or the orchestra. This, I suggest, is just as it should be: factoring the shaping intention into components helps us to understand the overall meaning of the work.

With film the sheer number of creative contributors sometimes makes it difficult to discern any major shaping influence, and the individual contributions sum and cancel out willy-nilly—with the result that we are not inclined to think of them as works of art at all. It is only when some artist with a strong creative will puts all other contributions under the one guiding principle that film becomes art. Thus the *Auteur Theory* did not so much describe film-making practice, it *prescribed* a way in which film could finally become an art form.

### 5. *Some Clarifications*

The thesis of this paper has been that the meaning of a work of Art is given by the artist's intention in creating it. The interpretation of the viewer is only relevant insofar as it is the best guess as to what the artist's intention is, or was. Thus any interpretation that could not possibly represent the artist's intention—because, say, it appeals to facts that the artist could not possibly be aware of—is a mistaken interpretation of the work. Over the years, starting with Wimsatt and Beardsley's article, a large number of misunderstandings of this thesis have grown up and I will now try to show why they are mistaken.

The most common objection to my thesis is that intentions are private and unrecoverable and are therefore out of reach. We cannot know what artists have intended except through their work. This objection comes in two forms, one strong and one weak. The strong version says that this unrecoverability is *in principle*; the weak version says that it is just: in practice.

The strong version of the thesis smacks—as I suggested at the beginning of the paper—of some form of Behaviourism; and without some

such support from that outmoded psychological idea would hardly be credible. We assess the intentions behind behaviour all the time and courts of law regularly need to do the same. Moreover if meanings of utterances are unrecoverable then the meaning of a critic's utterance would likewise be unrecoverable and then the thesis degenerates into an infinite regress of meaningless utterances.

The weak version of the thesis—that it is just *difficult* to recover intentions—has more plausibility. With authors long dead, or determinedly uncommunicative about why they have done what they've done, or perhaps being even wilfully misleading, it is indeed difficult to find out what they intended except to see what they have done. The work of art is, after all, our primary source of meaning, and all interpretation—to echo a sentiment of Professor Wollheim's—must start and end with it.

The real issue, however, is not with practicality, but with the admissibility of additional material when it is available. Should the critic use material other than the work when it presents itself? Is it proper to use other works that the artist has done to cast light on a particular work? Is it appropriate to use diaries, interviews, the recorded opinions of friends and acquaintances, to settle matters that no recourse to the work has been able to settle? I say the answer to all these questions is: yes.

Of course it hardly needs saying that the use of supplementary evidence must be handled judiciously and with due care. It is no easy matter, indeed it is as difficult as life itself, to weigh competing evidence in the scales, and come to some reasonable conclusion. And the more sparse the evidence, the more difficult the task becomes. But all this is no reason not to try, and one should certainly not try to circumscribe the critic's activity merely because the full task is very difficult.

Sometimes additional information can be vital and, all but decisive. Here is an example where I think that is the case. For many years now the film *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* has been interpreted as a thinly-veiled Cold War drama, expressing the fear of Communist take-over. Recently, however, the writer of the original story, Jack Finney, emphatically denied that this was any part of his intention; nor was it the intention of anyone else involved. Rather, he said, the story was intended to be an Existentialist drama—expressing the idea, from one man's perspective, that others around him were losing themselves in a dull conformity. Moreover this is what an unbiased viewer is likely to get from the film—unless, of course, informed in advance of the “right” interpretation.

On other occasions authors can be unreliable guides. Of the film *L'eclisse* the director Michelangelo Antonioni said

How can I tell you the story of *L'eclisse*? A story of imprisoned sentiments if told in a few words is ruined. It can lose all its significance...*L'eclisse*...is about a young working woman who leaves a man because she no longer loves him, and then leaves another man because she still loves him.

In this case I think Antonioni should not have tried to say what he has said can't be said. This is because the film does *not* show that Monica Vitti's character leaves her new boyfriend, played by Alain Delon, at the end. If this happens it is not in the script nor shown onscreen. It ends in a complete, and beautifully, ambiguous montage which could mean any one of a number of different things—the least interesting of which would be that the lovers have separated. Here is a case where we should not accept Antonioni's statement about his own meaning, and where it would be appropriate to adduce other evidence of Antonioni's misleading public statements. Antonioni's imagination was brilliantly visual—when he turned to words he became remarkably inexact.

Antonioni's case is not unique—artists can be misleading guides to their own intentions. But that is no reason never to take into account what they say, it just means that what they say cannot be taken to be an *infallible* guide to the work. As evidence, it is at best fallible, as all evidence must be.

So we may be agreed that it can be a more or less difficult task to know what an artist intended, without agreeing that there is any fallacy involved in attempting to determine it. And despite minatory grumblings from academics, readers of Shakespeare's Sonnets are interested, and will always be interested, in the question of who was the Dark Lady, and who the youth, and who the other poet. For it matters to readers whether these poems are a sincere outpouring arising from a real biographical circumstance, or whether they are a series of variations—done for purely intellectual amusement—on the theme of *love is blind*. By cleaving to some imaginary methodological purity, academics have ensured that they fail to answer questions that lovers of literature and art most want to ask: what does it *really* mean?

