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Art Criticism and Theories of Visual
Hermeneutics

Howard Riley

Making Sense of Art: The Relationship between Art Criticism and Theories of Visual Hermeneutics

Howard Riley, Swansea Metropolitan University, Wales, UK

Abstract: Many people experience bewilderment when exposed to the range of opinions on offer from a wide range of sources about the meanings of art works. Often these opinions are in conflict with one another, and this can lead to much confusion! The paper recommends an examination of the theories of visual hermeneutics - the interpretation of images - from which basis any particular art criticism stems, because in fact it is impossible to argue for any well-developed, coherent position of art criticism without acknowledging its corresponding theory of interpretation. Three groups of visual hermeneutic theory are identified, related to corresponding positions of art criticism, and discussed in terms of their advantages and disadvantages.

Keywords: Art Criticism, Visual Perception Theories

Introduction

The crucial question about any research project... (is)... how far, as a process, it illuminated our understanding of the whole human endeavour to make sense of our lives, and how fruitful it proved in suggesting new exploratory ventures.

(Salmon 1978:43)

AS SALMON SAYS, the business of being human is to make sense of things, and the one thing that has perhaps busied humans more than most is art. The occasion of the 4th International Conference on Arts in Society, held in Venice during the 2009 Biennale (at which a version of this paper was presented) gives the ideal opportunity to observe a universal truth: every society in human history has produced visual and tangible artefacts which serve a range of social functions: to record and represent perceptual, emotional or imaginal experiences; to communicate shared social values and educate the young about those values; to celebrate spiritual, social or personal belief systems; to mark the rites of passage that measure our existence, be they natural as the changing of the seasons, or cultural as the ceremonies of kinship relations. The plethora of opinions about the meanings of art works has been the source of much debate across the centuries. However, this paper proposes that all positions from which statements about the possible meanings of particular artworks are made, depend upon an underlying, often implicit theory of visual interpretation. The good news is that theories of art criticism and their related theories of hermen-

eutics may be classified into one of only three groups, which are outlined below.

It should be noted here – and I am indebted to one of my anonymous referees for suggesting this point be clarified – that not all art criticism is about the meaning of artworks *per se*. For example, some art criticism is concerned with the artist's intentions, some with the concerns of the social context of artworks. However, for the purposes of this paper, the term *art criticism* is intended to embrace all the possible relationships between the viewer, the artwork and the social context.

Viewer-as-Responder Theory

Theory that emphasises the response that the artwork produces in a spectator assumed to be passive.

This group of theorists, known as behaviourists, argue that since we can never know how other people experience the world, we should only examine their behaviour – how their behavioural responses correlate with variations in the stimulus (ie the artwork) presented to their view.

Viewer-as Contributor Theory

Theory that emphasises the internal, mental activity of the viewer, focussing upon what mental contributions the viewer brings to the artwork so as to make sense of it in terms of their previous experiences.

This group of theorists, known as *cognitivists*, since they are concerned with the cognitive processes, is divided into two sub-divisions:

Nativists, who argue that mental faculties for processing the received data are innate, di-



vinely-given, as it were. Gestalt theory is included in this sub-division.

Empiricists, who argue that the incoming data is mentally processed according to previous knowledge acquired through cultural learning or personal experience of the world.

Direct Theory

Theory which emphasises the formal, material properties of the art work under consideration. Attention is focused upon what the other two groups suppress: the material, formal properties of the artwork itself as the prime source of meaning.

Let's look at the three groups in more detail:

Viewer – as – Responder Theory

Since the early 1920's at least, psychologists such as J.B. Watson (1924) who were interested in human behaviour have emphasised the role of the response of the passive spectator in the presence of an artwork, together with the associated behaviours that the response induces. All such viewer-effect theories presuppose that it is through perceiving the artwork that the viewer is caused to respond or behave in certain specific ways. This response is in fact how the viewer is able to arrive at an interpretation of the artwork. However, this position implies that if theorists can ascertain which types of visual stimuli cause what types of behaviour, then they are able to determine whether an artwork has the properties necessary to induce the requisite behaviour; or they can examine behaviour which occurs in the presence of the artwork. Art theorists who subscribe to this theory believe that the nature of art lies in the effect it produces upon the viewer. One of the salient exponents of this position was Suzanne Langer (1953).

Viewer – as – Contributor Theory

The art theorists and critics linked with this group emphasise the importance of the mental associations that the viewer brings to the perception of the artwork. The assumption implicit in this position is that the significance or meaning of the artwork is determined:

1. In *nativist* terms by the contribution made by faculties innate in the brain, described in detail by the Gestalt psychologists in their *Principles of Perceptual Organisation* lucidly summarised by Max Wertheimer (1923).
2. In *empiricist* terms by what may be termed the 'cultural baggage' a viewer brings to the artwork, comprised from such factors as upbringing, learned knowledge and previous experience.

In this way, empiricist theory (which proposes that all human knowledge is gained through experience exclusively) is able to explain why people respond to the same work of art in different ways: viewers make their individual meanings through their individual experiences. This group of art theorists has therefore also to be concerned with what codes of interpretation are used by different individuals, different cultures, at different times. Ernst Hans Gombrich (1960) was one of the key theorists who elaborated this position.

This theoretical base of cognitivism (a term which embraces both empiricism and Gestalt theory) has become the basis of theoretical studies in Schools of Art throughout the Western world almost by default, since there appears to be a positive correlation between the amount of cultural knowledge a person acquires through such learning, and the ability to read artworks on culturally-based levels of meaning. (Arnheim 1974).

Direct Theory

A radical theory of visual perception which has had great potential for the visual arts was proposed by James J. Gibson (1979). He focused attention on the *structure of the stimulus*, which in the context of this paper relates to the work of art under scrutiny and its complex environment within which the viewer interacts, and his theory asserts that our physiological system which facilitates visual perception has evolved so as to pick up information directly from the structure of the light rays arriving at the eyes to make sense of what we see. According to Gibson, this information consists of the invariant features within the constantly-fluctuating structure of the array of light, having been reflected from the surfaces and edges of our material world. These invariants are noticed over changes in the reflected light brought about by movement within the environment, or by movement of the viewer.

Applied in terms of art theory and art criticism, this group, known as *formalists*, construes the work of art as a culturally-produced artefact within a material environmental context. The role of the viewer as either responder or contributor is suppressed in this third group. Instead, it is advocated that the main concern should be to analyse what is present in the artwork itself. Most often this concern is focused through discussion about the formal composition of the materials present in the work of art itself. One of the key advocates of this position was Clive Bell, who coined the term *significant form* (Bell 1914)

Critiques of the Three Groups of Hermeneutical Theories

Critique of the Viewer-as-Responder Theory

The notion that the meaning of a work of art is embedded in the effect it produces upon the viewer is one dear to the hearts of all those who want art criticism to be no more than a personal means of expressing subjective feelings about art. But this position cannot reveal anything either about the wider possible meanings of the artwork itself, or indeed anything new about the viewer to themselves.

More disturbing is the assumption on the part of theorists that since they are in a position to correlate properties of the art work with behaviour patterns in the viewer, they alone are in a position to judge that work of art's success. This assumption can lead to judgement of behaviour, and ultimately the way is open for this kind of art criticism to become an instrument of social manipulation. For example, behavioural responses which are deemed appropriate to the maintaining of the *status quo* may be encouraged: those works of art which produce the approved response being epitomised as 'works of high quality'.

The success of imagery used in advertisements relies heavily on its ability to instill the desired response in consumers, and of course it is a prime objective of the advertising agency that *all* advertisements are specifically designed to induce a behaviour pattern which results in the consumer buying the lifestyle or emotional feeling associated with the product or service depicted.

Note also that although the artwork is acknowledged as being the source of behavioural response, the formal composition in itself is not regarded as valuable except as a cause of behaviour. Under the influence of this theory, the work of art's significance and value is determined wholly by the effect it induces in members of a commodity-oriented society.

Critique of Viewer-as-Contributor Theories

Theorists subscribing to this set of theories emphasise neither the formal characteristics of the artwork as artefact, nor the behaviour of the viewer, but the viewer's mental processes of cognition, or understanding.

They generally do not emphasise discussion of the limits of interpretation acceptable between viewers, or the criteria by which an interpretation is validated. By neglecting the formal characteristics

of the artwork-as-object, they allow for an extremely wide range of latitude in the interpretive processes.

Critique of Direct, or Formalist Theories

This group of theorists asks: 'in what does the significance of the art work as object lie?' They answer by citing formal, material properties of the artwork and its surroundings that make it significant, meaningful. This position acknowledges the real problem of how to assess which properties or sets of properties of an artwork and its context are significant. Works of art are regarded as systems of cultural signs, and the analysis of sign-systems – semiotic analysis – is regarded as a most fruitful means of resolving this problem. (O'Toole 1994)

However, there is a degree of vagueness evident with the ecological theory of perception about exactly which invariant features of light structure carry information: similarly, formalist theories of art and art criticism can differ on what basic properties of artworks should be analysed to produce meaning. Yet the effort to clarify these areas can in itself reveal rich layers of meaning. The search to identify the sets of formal elements which yield significant form to the viewer is the valid endeavour of this group.

Conclusion

It will have been noticed by now that it is a fundamental human need to seek meanings from their surroundings, including works of art. This paper has pointed out that the making of sense from works of art has variously been theorised from three hermeneutical positions identified as involving either: the properties of the viewer; or the properties of the environmental and cultural context in which they all interact; or as a dependence on the material and formal properties of the art work itself. Each of the three groups discussed here isolates certain links in that complex system *viewer/artwork/context*, so as to emphasise its own convictions. An interim conclusion would indicate the complexities of attempting to define the parameters of meaning itself: for example, it is clear that there is a distinction between an aesthetic sense of meaning - one dependent upon the formal qualities of the artwork - and a more causal understanding, one that deals with cultural and psychological parameters which affect the viewer's perception of the material artefact.

The reader's task now is to weigh up the *pros* and *cons* of each position, but most importantly to test out these ideas by engaging with, and negotiating the meanings of a wide variety of works of art!

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About the Author

Dr. Howard Riley

Howard Riley trained at Hammersmith College of Art, Coventry College of Art, and the Royal College of Art. He has taught drawing and the history and theory of art in Australia and Malaysia, as well as the UK. He has published widely in the areas of art pedagogy and visual semiotics, and his drawings have been exhibited in Australia, Finland and the UK, most recently in the Wales Drawing Biennale, 2007, and in 'Nascent Opus', at The Elysium Gallery, Swansea, 2008.

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