

UNDERSTANDING ART :

ROBERT KRAUT

Some of us understand Picasso's work ; some of us don't. Marcel Duchamp aficionados are likely to claim an understanding of Duchamp's work. Practitioners of Punk Rock accuse music critics of not understanding their work, and thus, perhaps, of not being in any responsible position to *criticise* their work.

Such talk is familiar enough. What does it mean? What exactly *is* it to understand a work of art? What must I be able to do, or say, or feel, or what must I know, in order to qualify as understanding, say, the work of John Cage? Is understanding Cage's work anything like understanding a foreign language? Or is it like what goes on when a physicist understands the data? Or perhaps it's like what happens when a person understands another person? Perhaps we have several concepts of understanding at work here, and may be artistic understanding should be put into a category of its own. Or perhaps all these concepts of understanding (linguistic, scientific, psychological, artistic) collapse into one. In such a case, reflections on artistic understanding may bear fruits even outside of aesthetic theory.

My immediate goal here is to survey two attempts to define "artistic understanding". The first attempt, which turns on the notion of *artist's intention*, I dismiss — my arguments here are quite distinct from those often presented against "intentionalist critics". The second attempt, which defines "artistic understanding" in terms of the concept of *translation*, I explore more fully.

Preliminaries : Thought and Language :

Art historians frequently speak of artistic genres as though they were kinds of languages : thus, “Cezanne’s contributions to Cubist vocabulary”, “the Impressionists’ language of broken colour,” and the like. Such talk might best be construed as metaphor ; surely not all rule governed activity qualified as language activity. Art activity is perhaps better viewed as an attempt to solve certain kinds of problems within specific rule frameworks. We best understand Mondrian’s painting, for example, by learning that he was attempting to make various colors lie on a common picture plane. I make no attempt here to survey the respective merits of the ‘art as language’ and the ‘art as problem solving’ paradigms. If, however, we do take the “art as language” paradigm seriously, then the relation between art object and artist’s intention emerges as interestingly parallel to the relation between verbal activity and speaker’s intention.

The relation between verbal behavior and speaker’s intention has been characterized in various ways. Some claim that understanding a speaker’s utterances consists of grasping the thoughts or intentions which “lie behind”, or stand in some specified causal relation to, the utterances. Those influenced by Chisholm or Grice are likely to hold such a view — thus, language is meaningful because it expresses thoughts which are themselves the source or locus of meaning ; understanding sentences or other language episodes is a function of grasping the corresponding thought episodes. In marked contrast, there are analyses of meaning which involve no reference whatever to anything mentalistic (thoughts, intentions, ideas, etc.) on the part of the language users. Sellars and Quine are the most prominent advocates of such an approach. Neither would deny that speakers often have thoughts, beliefs, or intentions ; the claim is rather that language meaning can be explicated non-mentalistically. Moreover, and more to the point, the ascription of thoughts and intentions is to be itself explicated in terms of a non-mentalistic notion of language meaning.

Sellars has for many years maintained that the ascription of intentions and thoughts is posterior to, or an analogical extension of, the ascription of meaning to overt verbal behavior. He says

... the categories of intentionality are nothing more or less than the metalinguistic categories in terms of which we talk epistemically about overt speech ... 1

The basic idea is straightforward : talk of mental states and their objects is in some way derivative, or dependent upon, or an analogical extension of, talk about the overt behavior of bits of language. Such a thesis can be tremendously important for the theory of art. It may enable us to make sense of the prevalent view that painters “think in colors and angularities” or that musicians “think in tones”. The strategy would be this : construe thoughts or intentions on the model of “inner speech”; that is, construe them as inner states which play roles similar to those played by bits of overt verbal behavior. To ‘think in numbers’, then, is to engage in inner activity functionally equivalent to arithmetic discourse, which is a kind of overt activity. Analogously, the avant-garde jazz musician is, when performing, engaged in a kind of thought process structurally isomorphic to his overt musical activity. His music might be difficult to understand; there might be intentions “lying behind” the music. But the intentions are themselves musical structure. Grasping his intentions would thus be of little value in coming to understand his work — for his intentions are themselves to be construed on the model of his overt musical activity, an activity which, *ex hypothesi*, we do not understand. It is the dynamics of this process, the process of coming to understand an artistic genre or a specific work, which, after suitable preparation, will be explored in section 111.

Artist’s Intention : Sentence Meaning and the Museum Myth

The first tentative analysis of “artistic understanding” to be considered is :

- (1) Understanding a painting (a piece of music, etc.) consists in knowing the intentions of the artist (“grasping the artist’s intent”, etc.)

Here we have a claim that an art object is to be understood in terms of the intentions in a mind of its creator. When Picasso painted *Guernica*, something went on in his head like “Ah, let me now convey some propaganda, let me represent brutality with a bull, let me speak of the masses with a horse,.....” One understands *Guernica* if one knows what went on in Picasso’s head when he painted it.

None of this is very helpful, of course, unless we have an independent grip on the concept of an *intention*, a grip which does not in turn presuppose the concept of understanding the artist’s work. Unfortunately, we do not have this. (1) looks helpful only as long as we treat the notion of an *intention* as unproblematic, only as long as we do not puzzle about this talk of “what goes on in the artist’s mind”.

But when once we take the qualms of the philosopher of mind seriously and ask about the meaning of, say,

(2) Picasso had an intention to represent the fact that brutality is awful.

(1) falls apart in our hands. Or so I will argue.

An intention is a kind of mental act, or psychological episode. It is a variety of thought. Our Philosopher of Mind (let us call him Karl) puzzles about such things. He wants to know what (2) means.

Suppose for a moment that Karl subscribes to some form of logical behaviorism. He begins by offering us the following analysis of (2) :

(2.1) (while *Guernica* was being created) Picasso had a disposition to utter "Brutality is awful".

Aside from the usual problems and puzzles infecting behavioristic analyses, we are quick to note that (2.1) cannot possibly be true, for the simple reason that Picasso spoke no English (or so we may suppose for the present). He would not have had the disposition to utter an English sentence like "Brutality is awful". Karl, a reasonable philosopher, retrenches and offers us

(2.2) (while *Guernica* was being created) Picasso had a disposition to utter "La brutalidad es mal".

We now ask Karl why the presence of *that* particular disposition constitutes Picasso's intention. Why shouldn't (2) be analyzed in terms of Picasso's disposition to utter "La vida es sueño" ? Karl tells us the following :

(3) The disposition to utter the Spanish sentence *S* constitutes an intention to convey the fact that *P* if and only if '*P*' is the appropriate translation of *S* into English.

This seems fair enough (though in another context we might chide Karl for confusing use and mention). Karl's behavioristic analysis of *artist's intention* thus rests upon the concept of *appropriate translation*. Can Karl offer us a satisfactory analysis of this latter concept ? He makes an uncautious start :

(4) Picasso's utterance *S* has as its appropriate English translation the sentence *T* if and only if the intentions which Picasso expresses by using *S* are the same as those intentions which the ordinary English speaker expresses by using *T*.

This, of course, is of no value to Karl, he began by attempting to analyze the concept of *intention*. He had better not use the concept in his explication of *translation*. He needs a concept of translation which is itself behavioristically acceptable, and in terms of which artist's intention can be explicated. Taking his clue from Quine and Sellars, Karl tries again, this time with the following story.²

- (5) *T* (in English) is an appropriate translation of *S* (in Spanish) if and only if the *role* which *S* plays in the total behavioral repertoire of the Spanish speaker is the same as the role which *T* plays in the total behavioral repertoire of the English speaker.

This looks more promising ; we ask Karl to tell us about this idea of *roles* played by sentences, and *sameness* of such roles. He tells us that *S* and *T* may stand in the following relations :

- (a) the non-verbal stimuli which prompt the Spaniard's assent to *S* are the same as those which prompt an English speaker's assent to *T*. Put another way, states of the non-linguistic environment which cause the Spaniard to utter *S* are the same states which cause English speakers to utter *T*.
- (b) Spanish speakers respond to an utterance of *S* (they cry, they flee, or whatever) in much the same way that English speakers respond to an utterance of *T*.

There's much more that Karl wants to say here ; but this suffices to show us what he is about. He is doing what may be called "behavioristic semantics". It is not that he shuns all talk of intentions, beliefs, and thoughts. It is rather that the only sense he can make of such talk is in terms of overt behavior and dispositions to overt behavior. Specifically, he wants to talk about overt behavior like utterances and gestures, as being *functionally equivalent* (same typical causes, same typical effects) to overt behavior of ours. Thus, according to Karl's conceptual hierarchy, the concept of artist's intention rests upon the concept of translation, which in turn rests upon the concept of *sameness of behavioral role*. Perhaps we have a glimpse, then, of why Karl regards analysis (1) as getting things exactly backwards.

As it turns out, Karl is not a behaviorist ; yet his analysis of intention in terms of translation remains. For now Karl tells us that (2) (the statement of Picasso's intention) is to be analyzed as

- (6) Picasso was in an internal state which is itself functionally equivalent to those of Picasso's utterances which are best translated as English utterances of "Brutality is awful".

Karl is thus suggesting that *not only* bits of overt behavior, like Spanish utterances and English utterances, can have the same typical causes and effects, but moreover *inner events* (whether neural firings or pulsations in the ectoplasm) can have the same typical causes and effects as certain kinds of overt behavior. The typical causes of Picasso's utterances of "La brutalidad es mal" are $C_1 \dots C_n$; the typical effects of such an utterance are $E_1 \dots E_n$. As it turns out, Karl suggests, there is a class K of neural states which Picasso's inner mechanisms can assume, such that each member of K is characteristically brought on by $C_1 \dots C_n$, and, moreover, characteristically results in $E_1 \dots E_n$. Picasso's intention to represent the fact that brutality is awful comes to neither more nor less than Picasso's being in an inner state which is a member of K .

Karl need not be a "materialist" to talk this way. He can remain uncommitted about Picasso's inner constitution. Even a Cartesian, at least a responsible one, can speak of internal states (of the "psychological stuff") which play certain roles, the roles played by certain bits of overt behavior. Karl is simply suggesting that talk of Picasso's intentions itself presupposes our ability to "translate" Picasso's overt behavior into our own behavior (whether our verbal activity or some other kind of behavior). So why not forget about intentions, Karl asks, and try to analyze artistic understanding directly in terms of the concept of *translation*? Why not say that we understand *Guernica* if we can translate it?

But translate it into *what*?

Art and Translation :

The present analysis of "artistic understanding" is

- (7) Understanding a painting (a piece of music, etc.) consists in the ability to translate the work into one's background language.

This analysis is initially suspect. Poetry, it is often said, is something which "evaporates from all translation". Had *Guernica* had a sentential equivalent, it would not have been necessary to paint it — the corresponding sentence could have sufficed. Translating the first few bars of a Schönberg piece seems futile — what could we possibly offer as the English equivalent of a tonal sequence constructed on a Pentatonic scale.

Such considerations may be quite beside the point, depending upon the notion of translation which we embrace. We must first say how much of one's total behavioral repertoire is to qualify as one's background language. We must also specify the constraints on an adequate translation.

Consider Picasso's *The Studio* (1928). Walter, a well meaning art enthusiast, looks at it. He claims not to understand it (though he finds it quite attractive). We summon our resident "expert", who tells Walter something like this: "the grey oval on the left is the painter's head. The small grey circle is the thumb hole in the artist's palette. The two triangles are a fruit bowl which the artist is working from. The diagonal line to the lower right of the painter's head is his brush."³ etc. Walter now claims to have a better *understanding* of the painting than he did before the expert talked to him. The expert, we might say, explained the picture to Walter. But this is simply to say that he helped Walter to understand it. What does any of this have to do with translation?

Our philosopher Karl suggested earlier that an item in one language is the translation of an item in another language if the items play, in their respective languages, the same behavioral role. Our Picasso expert knows enough about the Picasso of the 1920's to be able to say that large grey elliptical ovals, especially those perched upon triangles, play much the same role in Picasso's "painting behavior" which utterances of the expression "artist's head" play in our own verbal behavior. The expert's "explanation" can thus be viewed as a kind of *translation* of the marks which Picasso produced in 1928 into the marks or noises which we produce these days. This activity makes no reference to Picasso's intentions or thoughts — it does, however, place Picasso's pictorial behavior (the upshot of which is the object of Walter's present concern) within the frame work of Walter's own behavior, and thus requires a good deal of data about Picasso's environment, his other behavior, his interaction with other people, his overt (perhaps verbal) responses to his own work, and the like. This is the kind of information which, if we are lucky, the Art Historian makes available to us.

This seems plausible. (7) looks like a good beginning to an analysis of artistic understanding. How might it be faulted?

One might object as follows: Picasso presumably understood his own work. Yet it is not clear that he had the ability to "translate" it into his background language (Spanish). In fact, very little (if any) of his Spanish-uttering behavior

was functionally equivalent to any of his painting behavior (in the sense of its having the same typical causes and the same typical effects). Since he couldn't "translate", he didn't understand his own work.

The objection is misguided; it turns on too narrow a construal of "translation", or, perhaps, on too narrow a delineation of Picasso's *background language*. We can save analysis (7) by recalling that there are at least two ways to qualify as understanding a language: one can have the ability to translate it into one's background language, or one can simply have the ability to speak it, to engage in fluent dialogue with other members of the relevant community. Broadly construed, the Spanish speaker does have the capacity to translate Spanish utterances into his background language; he simply uses a "homophonic translation manual", an identity map which pairs utterances up with themselves. Our Spanish speaker's understanding of his own home language can thus be brought under the translational rubric, as the limiting case of translational ability. Maximal understanding of Spanish, we might say, consists in the ability to speak it.

Picasso's "background language" includes not only his Spanish utterances but also his painting behavior. His understanding of Cubism consists in his ability to work within its constraints; painting Cubistically is thus on a par with speaking Spanish. His behavior is in each case sanctioned by the rules, either those of Spanish or those of Cubist colour manipulation. (Of course, Picasso introduced many of the rules himself, but that is quite another matter.) Functional equivalences between Spanish utterances and Cubist painting behavior are not required by (7).

This broadening of Picasso's "language base" (the range of his behavior to which we are willing to apply translational concepts) has a very important consequence for the theory of artists' intentions, and, more specifically, for our very capacity to understand Picasso himself. Karl pointed out earlier that ascriptions of intention to Picasso involve the ascription of states which are functionally equivalent to Picasso's overt episodes. We begin to understand Picasso's intentions by translating Picasso's sentences into our own, and then using the items in our background language (e.g., the sentence "Brutality is awful") in terms of which to describe Picasso's mental states. Thus we understand Picasso's intentions in terms of his overt behavior, specifically his language activity, which we in turn understand by translating it into our own English-utterance behavior. It is clear, however, that much of Picasso's overt behavior does not admit of any precise

functional equivalent in English — his painting behavior, for example. There is perhaps *some* similarity between his use of grey ovals perched upon triangles, and our use of the expression “artist’s head”. But the fit is not precise. There are similarities of role, but there are also differences. If our “home language” is exhausted by English, then we have found the closest fit we can get. There is no item in our own English behavioral repertoire (we may suppose) which comes any closer, in terms of typical causes and typical effects of utterance, than does the expression “artist’s head”. So if our own ascription of intentions (or thoughts in general) is as intimately tied to translation as Karl has suggested, Picasso’s intentions do not admit of any ready formulation in English. We cannot say what they are, without fitting them to the Procrustean bed of our own background language.

Perhaps we cannot *say* what they are, but we can *show* what they are. Picasso showed them to us, in the overt activity which culminated in his paintings. The way to understand Picasso, then, is to understand his work, and perhaps the best way to do that is to learn to paint as he did, thus extending our own background language. This is merely regulative ideal, a point at which we could properly claim “total” understanding of Picasso’s work in much the way we might claim a total understanding of our own English utterances. The ideal translator of Spanish into English can, when the mood seizes him, go bilingual. The further he gets from that mark, and the further we get from the capacity to paint like Picasso, compose like Schonberg, or play like Keith Jarrett, the further we get from a total understanding of the work. This need not disturb us. We can, and do, settle for partial understanding.

Conclusion :

The point of this discussion has not been to argue the irrelevance of artist’s intention to an understanding of the artist’s work. It is undeniable that a failure to understand certain artwork often consists of a failure to grasp the relevant intentions of the artist. The student who construes *Moby Dick* as a parable addressed to the insurgence of Communism is quite properly advised that Melville neither knew nor cared about Communism. Schonberg intended certain of his pieces to be examples of serial music ; Boccioni intended his paintings to picture the motion and dynamic sensation of urban life. Knowledge of such facts is often helpful and relevant.

The point has been, rather, that the *analysis* or *definition* of artistic meaning and artistic understanding should not be in terms of artist's intention. Reference to thoughts and intentions itself presupposes reference to the roles played by overt verbal episodes and there is no reason, in the course of artistic inquiry, to give primacy to the artist's verbal episodes. It is in becoming familiar with the roles played by bits of overt artistic behavior — whether the use of specific word sequences in poetry or the use of specific optical mixtures of color in painting — that artistic understanding is achieved.

Imagine a Galactic traveler who brings us the products of his artistic labors. His works mystify us ; his words mystify us ; his attitudes, including his intentions, mystify us. An attempt to relate his behavior, words, works, and all, to our own, is not an attempt to discover determinate mental processes which lie behind the behavior. It is rather an attempt to explain and predict the traveler's behavior by relating it to our own by way of functional similarities. This much has been stressed for years by Quine. Yet the sentiment has been conspicuously lacking from discussions in aesthetic theory. The process of coming to understand the traveler's artworks is not significantly different from the process of translating his language. Occasionally, one of his pictures might work much the way one of his sentences does. Let p be such a picture, and let S be its sentential correlate. If S is best translated as "The planetary citizens are restless", they would be leverage for claiming.

- (8) p was intended to convey the fact that the planetary citizens are restless.

This would be helpful. But notice that the explanation in terms of intention is dependent upon a synonymy relation, or functional equivalence, between the painting and a bit of non-pictorial language. When we observe that

- (9) de Chirico's *Nostalgia of the Infinite* was intended to disclose a mysterious metaphysical reality.

we are saying something informative and true. I have suggested that a further analysis of (9) would, however, yield something on the order of

- (10) de Chirico's *Nostalgia of the infinite* had a function which was relevantly similar to sentences which are about a mysterious metaphysical reality.

Thus the explanation of meaning in terms of intention amounts to an explanation of the meaning of certain linguistic items in terms of the meaning of other linguistic items. Such explanation is surely legitimate. But this should not blind us to the fact that artistic meaning is to be found, not in the artist's mind, but in the work itself. Any attempt to naturalize aesthetic theory, specifically the theory of artistic understanding, will have to take this into account.⁴

REFERENCES :

1. "Chisholm-Sellars Correspondence on Intentionality," in *Minnesota Studies in The Philosophy of Science, Volume II*, ed. Feigl, Scriven and Maxwell (University of Minnesota Press : Minneapolis, 1957) : p. 522.
2. See e.g., W.V. Quine *Word and Object* (Cambridge, Mass. : M.I.T. Press, 1960), Ch.2 ; Wilfrid Sellars, "Language as Thought and as Communication", in his *Essays in Philosophy and Its History* (Dordrecht : D. Reidel, 1974) : pp. 93-117.
3. Our resident expert is John Canaday ; see his *Metropolitan Seminars in Art-Portfolio 4 : Abstraction* (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1958) : p. 9.
4. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Thirty-Sixth Annual Meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics. I am indebted to Lee Brown, Robert Howell, Bill Lycan, and Jim Rubino for criticism and discussion which led to improvements.

Ohio State University,
Columbus, Ohio (U.S.A.)