

The Autonomy of Interpretation

THIJS LIJSTER

Introduction

How does a work of art relate to its interpretations, and vice versa? This has been a long and ongoing debate in the history of art, aesthetics and hermeneutics. But while traditional discussions revolved primarily around the true intentions of the author (whether it be God or Aristotle), twentieth-century philosophy and literary criticism has left us with the question of the *autonomy* of both the work *and* of the interpretation. Semiotician Umberto Eco, in a book published in 1962, famously spoke of the 'open work' (Eco 1989), the work which is fragmentary and deliberately left unfinished by the artist, so that the work of the interpreter is needed in order to complete it. Going one step further, Roland Barthes in an even more famous essay from 1967 proclaimed the 'death of the author', arguing that the author (or artist in any other discipline) cannot claim, or be granted, any *authority* over the meaning of the work. The death of the author, Barthes wrote, marks the birth of the reader; in other words, it puts the authority over the meaning of the work in the hands of its (many) interpreters.

Where does this leave the work of art itself? Does it become a mere screen for the interpreter to project any meaning on, however they please? Where is meaning located, or where does it happen? Certainly, the work must have part in what this meaning entails? Here we are faced with an interesting tension regarding the autonomy of the work of art *vis-à-vis* its interpretations (and vice versa), which has determined debates on interpretation ever since. On the one extreme, we find the position that sees in interpretation a threat to the artwork's integrity and autonomy. This is a position that was most forcefully and polemically voiced in Susan Sontag's essay *Against Interpretation*, where she writes:

Like the fumes of the automobile and of heavy industry which befoul the urban atmosphere, the effusion of interpretations of art today poisons our sensibilities. In a culture whose already classical dilemma is the hypertrophy of the intellect at the expense of energy and sensual capability, interpretation is the revenge of the intellect upon art. Even more. It is the revenge of the intellect upon the world. To interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world - in order to set up a shadow world of 'meanings.'
(Sontag 2009, 7)

On the other side of the spectrum, we would find the position denying the autonomy of the work. Hans-Georg Gadamer, for instance, argues that it is the interpreter who first establishes what he calls the 'hermeneutic identity' of the work: "To understand something, I must be able to identify it. [...] I identify something as it was or as it is, and this identity alone constitutes the meaning of the work" (Gadamer 1986, 25).

In this article, I want to take up this issue, and the question to what extent the work of art can be said to be autonomous if interpretation plays a crucial part in constituting it. I want to argue that both the work of art and its interpretation are autonomous not despite, but *because* of the fact that they constitute one another. To do so, I will first draw on Immanuel Kant and Theodor W. Adorno in order to argue that aesthetic autonomy is precisely what both problematizes and necessitates interpretation. Next, I will discuss how Georg Bertram considers discursive interpretation (or criticism) as one among many *interpretative practices* relating to the work of art. This broadened understanding

of interpretation will allow us consider both the relation of the work with its interpretations, and the concept of aesthetic autonomy, in a new light.

1. The Impossibility of Interpretation

Adorno, in *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), described the aporia that lies in the heart of interpretation, and thus in a way already alluded to the issue discussed in the introduction: “The afterlife of artworks, their reception as an aspect of their own history, transpires between a do-not-let-yourself-be-understood and a wanting-to-be-understood” (Adorno 2004, 384). In other words, on the one hand works of art resist understanding, on the other hand they make a constant appeal to our understanding, they want or even demand to be understood. Under this condition, and in this way, interpretation of artworks can be said to be both impossible and necessary.

Why is this so, and where does this aporia come from? Let us start by analytically distinguishing the question of the impossibility of understanding from the question of the necessity of understanding (although both are closely related to the idea of aesthetic autonomy), and divide these questions over Kant and Adorno. With regard to the first, we can already recognize an explanation of this impossibility in Kant’s analysis of the aesthetic judgment, which he considers to be a judgment that is “without a concept” (Kant 1987, 64). Without a concept implies that I do not have to know what a thing is or supposed to be or do – or in Kant’s terms what its ‘purpose’ is – in order to make an aesthetic judgment. Kant uses the example of the flower: to enjoy its beauty, I do not have to be a botanist, that is, I do not have to know that the flower is in fact the reproductive organ of the plant (i.e. I don’t have to know the flower’s purpose).

In the case of fine arts, one could argue that knowing the purpose of the thing can get in the way of aesthetic enjoyment, which is why Kant argues that “fine art must have the *look* of nature even though we are conscious of it as art” (Kant 1987, 174). By this he does not mean that art should imitate nature, but rather that it must have the same sense of spontaneity that natural beauties have. Once we become aware that a thing is intentionally produced *in order to* please us or to move us, and of the ways through which the artist *wanted* to produce such an effect in us, a work of art can quickly turn into kitsch. In other words, even if a work of art is produced with the intention to aesthetically please us, or to produce in us some kind of idea, it should not *betray* this intention or purpose, according to Kant.

That the aesthetic judgment is ‘without a concept’ is not to say that understanding plays no part in it. On the contrary, Kant famously described aesthetic enjoyment as the ‘free play’ of the cognitive faculties. What characterizes the aesthetic judgment and sets it apart from logical judgments is that, indeed, we are faced with a presentation (or in Pluhar’s translation an ‘intuition’) (*Anschauung*) for which no concept is given, but which for that very reason provokes the power of understanding. It is, in Kant’s terms a “sensation of both the imagination in its *freedom* and the understanding in its *lawfulness*, as they reciprocally quicken each other” (Kant 1987, 151). It is, in other words, precisely through its ‘conceptlessness’ that the aesthetic object stimulates our mind, and holds our attention. “We linger in our contemplation of the beautiful”, Kant writes elsewhere in the *Critique of Judgment*, “because this contemplation reinforces and reproduces itself.” (Kant 1987, 68)

Now although Kant is often thought to deal with the fine arts with a rather formalist approach, he does have interesting things to say about hermeneutics, too. That his aesthetic theory is concerned with the interpretation of artworks becomes clear once we look at his conception of ‘aesthetic ideas’. In §49 of the *Critique of Judgment* he defines the aesthetic idea, in line with his analysis of the aesthetic judgment, as “a presentation of the imagination *which prompts much thought, but to which no determinate thought whatsoever, i.e. no [determinate] concept, can be adequate*, so that no language can express it completely and allow us to grasp it” (Kant 1987, 182, emphasis mine). He proceeds by saying that the aesthetic idea is the counterpart of the rational idea (which he had explained in the *Critique of Pure Reason*): whereas in a rational idea, no intuition is adequate to express a concept of reason (e.g., God, the soul, and the totality of nature), in the case of aesthetic ideas no concept of the

understanding is adequate for the presentations of the imagination. We might, of course, give words to express our aesthetic experience, or to convey what we sense the artwork means. For example, we might say that Shakespeare's *Othello* is about jealousy and its destructive effects, or we might say that Van Gogh's painting of a pair of shoes calls to mind the labor performed by the one who wore them, thus providing a sense of dignity to such a mundane object. At the same time, though, we realize that such words fall short, and will always fall short, of catching the meaning of the work; indeed, as Kant says, no determinate thought whatsoever can be adequate.¹ Which is why the meaning of the work will produce ever new thoughts and associations that keep the mind going, and exceed the interpretation that is given.

No concept or set of concepts could grasp the numerous thoughts and association provoked by the work; if that were the case it would not continue to fascinate us, to prompt thought. Kirk Pillow, in his account of Kant, therefore characterizes the aesthetic idea as "the spur to an open-ended exploration of meaning and significance" (Pillow 1994, 453). Importantly for our present purposes, for Pillow these aesthetic ideas do not merely play a role in the production of fine art by the 'genius' (the context in which Kant mainly discusses them), but also in the interpretation works of art: our experience of the work produces an 'excess' of thought in the recipient, thereby exceeding the boundaries of his conceptual understanding and producing in his mind the aesthetic idea.

This already points to the necessity of interpretation, namely that works of art, as Adorno put it, *want* to be understood.

2. The Necessity of Interpretation

In the aesthetic experience, Kant suggests, our desire to identify what a thing is (its concept) or what it is for (its purpose) is both constantly stimulated *and* frustrated, so that we are inclined to continue to contemplate its presentation to our senses, what Kant calls the *Anschauung*. It is not surprising then, that twentieth-century artists and theorists (from Greenberg to Adorno) returned to Kant to discuss tendencies in modernist art, like abstraction and minimalism. Modernist works, after all, often did not aim to represent anything 'outside' the work, but in many cases rather just *were*; namely configurations of colors and lines, or musical sounds, or objects in space. As the American minimalist artist Frank Stella once said about his own work: "*What you see is what you see*".

Susan Sontag, in her already mentioned essay, suggested that abstraction was a response and even a resistance to interpretation: "Abstract painting is the attempt to have, in the ordinary sense, no content; since there is no content, there can be no interpretation. Pop Art works by the opposite means to the same result; using a content so blatant, so 'what it is,' it, too, ends by being uninterpretable." (Sontag 2009, 10) But although her intuition that these works 'resist' interpretation might be correct, her statement that there 'can be no interpretation' must be wrong, since it ignores the paradox that we alluded to, namely that the resistance rather provokes the interpretation. Stella and Sontag suggest some kind of self-evidence or transparency, while in fact 'seeing what you see' or just being 'what it is' rather makes such objects particularly enigmatic, in a way that regular objects are not. Of a regular object one could say: 'that is a corkscrew', or 'that is a signpost'. We recognize them and know what they are, and they clearly refer to a certain context of meaning or use (what Kant calls a 'purpose', or what Martin Heidegger would call a *Zeugzusammenhang*, a coherence of the corkscrew, together with the cork, the wine bottle, the glass, etc. within a context of use). But the same does not apply to a sculpture by, for instance, Sol Lewitt. Confronted with such an object, we ask: what is this, what are you for, why do you look like you do, and *what do you mean*. Or perhaps even: is this art? This is even (or particularly) the case when we *are* dealing with an 'ordinary' object in an artistic context: we might identify it as, let's say, a pissoir or a soup can, but this raises the question of what it is doing *there*. Works of art (modern works in particular but I would argue works in general) have, in Georg Bertram's words, a 'flawed self-evidence' (*mangelnden Selbstverständlichkeit*), by which he does not mean that art suffers some lack or flaw but rather that works of art necessarily prompt questions, thoughts, and ideas (Bertram 2005, 19).

This is also what Adorno meant when he wrote the following about the ‘reity’ (*Dinghaftigkeit*) of the artwork:

Artworks are things that tend to slough off their reity. However, in artworks the aesthetic is not superimposed on the thing in such a fashion that, given a solid foundation, their spirit could emerge. Essential to artworks is that their thingly structure, by virtue of its constitution, makes them into what is not a thing; their reity is the medium of their own transcendence. (Adorno 2004, 357)

Works of art make an appeal to our understanding then, not *despite* the fact that they are mere things, but precisely because of it. A work of art, for Adorno, refers to and emphasizes its own ‘thingliness’, and thus constitutes a thing that is, or at least claims to be, meaningful and valuable in itself, and not because it is an exemplar of a category of objects or because we can somehow use it. Thus, it shows an excess of meaning that is actually part of the natural world as a whole, and that Adorno calls the ‘more’.² Hence, the work of art is what Hegel called a ‘sensuous particular’, in the sense that it is a unique thing that does not resemble anything else, but as such is also pointing beyond itself: it is an embodiment of the *promise* of sensuous particularity (or non-identity), the irreducibility of sensuous experience to an overarching structure or schema of thought. Jay Bernstein, with a Kantian formulation, referred to this ‘more’ or this ‘beyond’ as a form of ‘meaningfulness without meaning’ (Bernstein 2006, 59). In other words, we sense that we are, as it were, spoken to, i.e. that an appeal to our understanding is made – an appeal that is also mentioned by poets such as Baudelaire and Rilke.³ However, we cannot determine exactly what this meaning is, nor will we be able to fully put it into words.

As said, this is an experience that could in principle be possible in encounters with any kind of object, but according to Adorno, in a world dominated by instrumental reason and ‘identity thinking’, art is the only realm where such an experience is still possible: “Artworks are plenipotentiaries of things that are no longer distorted by exchange, profit, and the false needs of a degraded humanity” (Adorno 2004, 298). Precisely because the work of art not only is a sensuous particular but also embodies the promise of sensuous particularity, it points to the meaning that objects have of their own, beyond exchange, use, or categorization. This ‘excess’ of meaning (or the ‘more’) makes an appeal to our understanding, to interpretation, and *not interpreting* the work of art (i.e. ignoring the appeal) would mean degrading it to the status of an object of use. Adorno writes: “Artworks [...] await their interpretation. The claim that there is nothing to interpret in them, that they simply exist, would erase the demarcation between art and nonart” (Adorno 2004, 169). Or, as he puts it elsewhere in *Aesthetic Theory*, with a wink to the opening line of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*: “[Art] is an entity that is not identical with its empiria. What is essential to art is that which in it is not the case” (*was an ihr nicht der Fall ist*) (Adorno 2004, 426).

From this it follows that interpretation is absolutely necessary. Not only because we, as it were, cannot help ourselves in attributing meaning to a work, as was already implied in the Kantian concept of the ‘aesthetic idea’. It is also necessary for the work itself, to actually exist *qua* work of art in the first place. For Adorno, this entails that the work of art, as already said, cannot be reduced to its ‘thingliness’ or ‘reity’, but is a ‘process of becoming’ in the ears, eyes and minds of its recipient.⁴ Through interpretation, works of art keep on developing or ‘unfolding’ (*Entfaltung*), long after the artist has finished them. This concept of interpretation, however, also implies that the ‘crystallization’ of interpretation is never definite, since the process-character of the work depends on constant reinterpretation.⁵

If we now again look at interpretation through the lens of the concept of autonomy, we return to the paradox already mentioned in the introduction. On the one hand, the work of art is autonomous in the meaning it conveys, which cannot in any way be ‘translated’ into some other form without damaging the integrity of both the artwork and its meaning (if that distinction even makes sense in the first place). On the other hand, however, the work of art is dependent on being experienced, and on interpretation to grant this experience meaning and significance, lest it be an ‘ordinary’ object. However, we can now see that this is not so much a contradiction but that the impossibility and the necessity of interpretations are two sides of the same coin. Exactly because the work of art is autono-

mous, in the sense that it is irreducible to some concept or context of use, it is at the same time ‘relational’, pointing beyond itself in its meaning, and allowing for a variety of different interpretations, which in turn develop a distinct level of independence from the work of art that they are attempting to understand.

Now that we have established the dialectical relationship between the autonomy of the work of art and the autonomy of interpretation, let us take a closer look at the practice of interpretation, and at what the above reflections imply for that practice.

3. The Practice of Interpretation

How does the interpreter deal with the ‘excess’ of meaning of the work; how can they find meaning in a thing that both demands and resists to be understood? How does the work *work* upon its interpreter, while at the same time remaining autonomous from any definite meaning? Adorno, in *Aesthetic Theory*, writes: “If artworks do not make themselves like something else but only like themselves, then only those who imitate them understand them.” (Adorno 2004, 166). Likewise, in his essay ‘Presuppositions’ (1961) (from *Notes to Literature*) he argues that interpretation is a *mimetic* activity, in that the beholder or interpreter tries to ‘follow’, the work where it takes them. He writes:

One does not understand a work of art when one translates it into concepts [...] but rather when one is immersed in its immanent movement; I should almost say, when it is recomposed by the ear in accordance with its own logic, repainted by the eye, when the linguistic sensorium speaks along with it. (Adorno 2019, 366)

This calls to mind the anecdote about the pianist who was asked, after playing a sonata, what the piece meant, after which he took place behind the piano and started playing it again. As persuasive as this anecdote might be, it contradicts that we in fact *do* attempt to give words to our aesthetic experiences, ‘translate it into concepts’, and we even established that there is a need and necessity to do so. Furthermore, the ‘mimesis’ Adorno is talking about is not, as I take it, an exact copying of the work, but rather a form of ‘resembling’ and indeed ‘following’ (*Nachvollziehen*). Elsewhere in *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno also writes: “The mimesis of artworks is their resemblance to themselves” (Adorno 2004, 137). The phrase ‘resemblance to themselves’ (just as the formulation of the work being ‘like itself’ in the earlier quote) already suggests that the work of art does not completely coincide with itself (which precisely refers to the ‘excess’ of meaning the work has vis-à-vis its ‘thingliness’)⁶, which in turn means that the second performance the pianist in the anecdote gives is indeed already an ‘interpretation’ of the first one, or in any case both are different interpretation of the same sonata.

Here I think it might be useful to take a step back, and consider the broader concept of interpretation as a set of specific practices that we encounter in Georg Bertram’s book *Art as Human Practice* (2019). There are three aspects that are particularly relevant about Bertram’s account for our present purposes, and that I will elaborate on in what follows. First, the fact that he focuses on the activity, rather than on the ontology, of art, whereby he understands interpretative activity as “a practice that articulates the structure of the artwork by retracing the way elements are configured in it” (Bertram 2019, 130). Second, the fact that Bertram does not see interpretation in the narrow sense of an exclusively linguistic (conceptual) activity, but rather considers that concept of interpretation as merely one type amongst a variety of interpretative practices. Nor does he privilege that form of interpretation. Third, the fact that he emphasizes the *autonomy* of the interpretative praxis vis-à-vis the work of art, even though the latter constitutes this praxis.

The first aspect, though closely related to the third, deserves separate mention, since it views interpretation through the lens of Bertram’s entire project, namely of understanding art as a particular type of human praxis, which however should not be considered in isolation of other human activities. Bertram criticizes what he calls the ‘autonomy-paradigm’ (e.g. the theories of Christoph Menke and Arthur C. Danto) that emphasizes the specificity of art or the aesthetic experience, but

by consequence is unable to determine the value of art or aesthetics within human life. This is not the place to discuss Bertram's aesthetics in its entirety, but it does already hint to the way he considers the relation between art and interpretation, namely as practices that mutually constitute one another. He uses the term 'challenge' (*Herausforderung*) to explain the dialogic character of that relation, an explanation that is worthwhile to quote at length:

In employing the notion of a challenge to explain the dynamic relation of an artwork to the practices of recipients, it is to demonstrate that the constitution of artworks is inextricably bound up with these practices. The artwork's structure only shows itself to be challenging by being taken up by the recipient. [...] Even the dynamic process that emerges from artworks thus has two sides: on the one hand, the self-relational constitution of the artwork, and on the other hand, the activities that recipients carry out in dealing with the artwork. We cannot understand either of these two aspects independently of the other. The self-related constitution is arranged around activities that recipients unfold, and these activities are arranged around the self-related constitution. Artworks are thus bound up with activities that they call forth. (Bertram 2019, 128)

The activities Bertram is thinking of, as already mentioned, exceed merely linguistic or conceptual forms of interpretation (such as art criticism, art history, etc.). He distinguishes between four types, namely bodily, perceptive, emotional, and symbolic practices of interpretation. An example of 'bodily' interpretation would be dancing, or tapping one's fingers or foot, when hearing music, or walking around a sculpture in order to be able to view from different angles or to get a sense of its magnitude. Perceptive interpretation refers to particular types of seeing or hearing that a work might require; for instance, the way a film or painting can 'steer' our gaze, or it refers to the fact that it requires a trained ear to discern a particular line in a polyphonous piece of music. Emotional practices refer to the challenge the artwork poses to be emotionally engaged with, for instance, the hero of a story, or to be saddened or frightened by a work of art. Symbolic articulations, finally, refer to interpretation in the narrow sense discussed up until now, that is linguistic practices in the field of art criticism, history and theory, but it could also include artistic practices, for instance interpreting a novel when making a film adaption of it. The latter example calls into mind the critic A.O. Scott's reversal of Flaubert's (in)famous remark that every critic is a failed artist: "It would be too much to say that every artist is a failed critic, unable to appreciate what already exists without adding to it, but it does not seem to me inaccurate to say that all art is successful criticism" (Scott 2016, 22).

The gain in considering interpretation in its full breadth, including, besides thinking and writing, a variety of practices ranging from listening and seeing to dancing and laughing, is twofold. In the first place, interpretation has often been understood in a purely cognitive, which also often meant a distanced or detached, way. By widening our understanding of interpretation, we can see that interpretation, in all its various forms, is not detached but rather in a close relation with the work. We can here again think of the example of dancing, as a form of bodily interpretation: when we dance to music, our movements are constituted by the music, by its rhythm or mood. I already emphasized this when I referred to Adorno's notion of interpretation as mimesis. In Adorno's aesthetics, however, this goes to the point of a complete submission of the interpreter to the work, for instance where he writes the following:

The spectator must not project what transpires in himself on to the artwork in order to find himself conformed, uplifted, and satisfied in it, but must, on the contrary, relinquish himself to the artwork, assimilate himself to it, and fulfill the work in its own terms. In other words, he must submit to the discipline of the work rather than demand that the artwork give him something. (Adorno 2004, 355)

At the same time, however, it is clear that our bodies are not fully or literally controlled by the music. Despite what Grace Jones sang, we are not *slaves* to the rhythm. Rather, we *orient* our movements to the music, as Bertram puts it, and attempt to *articulate* the music through our bodies in a particular way.⁷ By consequence, the dance is a praxis that has a level of independence in relation to the music.

We can now ‘translate’ this broad understanding of interpretation back to the concept of interpretation (in the narrow sense) that we started with. Interpretation, understood in the narrow sense as criticism, assigning meaning to a work of art using conceptual language, is then one among a variety of interpretative praxes. Like other practices (such as dance, listening, or laughing) we can conceive of it as a particular form of articulation, a response to the challenge that the work of art poses. This means that interpretation is indeed steered by the ‘dynamic process’ emerging from the work – the work does not just lie passively waiting for us to project some meaning onto it – but at the same time the *act* of interpretation depends on the receptivity and creativity of the interpreter, indeed much like is the case for a dance performance.

This brings us to the third aspect of Bertram’s conception of interpretation, which refers to the way he understands aesthetic autonomy. For Bertram, autonomy refers, firstly, to the self-referentiality of the work of art, i.e. that a work makes reference and raises attention to its own materiality, in order to generate meaning (what with Adorno we called the ‘thingliness’ of the work of art). This meaning, however, is not fixed, but part of what he calls a dynamic process. He writes:

[A]n artwork is a structure that is constituted in a self-referential way, and from this a dynamic emerges that is open for constant further development. These further developments occur in and through the way in which those who deal with artworks articulate them. Thus, an artwork is connected with the practices that it provokes among those who deal with it, which entails that these practices are always subject to further refinement and do not come to an end point. (Bertram 2019, 141-142)

This implies that autonomy, in this context, does not mean that artistic and interpretative practices are isolated from one another. Quite the contrary, since as already discussed, they constitute each other: the dance is ‘provoked’ by the music, and the music is articulated by the dance. In line with Gadamer’s notion of *Wirkungsgeschichte* (historically effected consciousness), a work of art changes throughout history and under the influence of the interpretations given to it, and the way we perceive and understand a work is (consciously or unconsciously) influenced by previous interpretations. Our understanding of a play by Sophocles, for instance, will be mediated through the Christian tradition, through translations into our mother tongue, through the interpretations of Hegel and Freud, or through different the different adaptations for the stage or the screen that have existed. But while autonomy does not entail isolation, it does mean that each interpretative praxis has an independence (*Eigenständigkeit*) vis-à-vis both the work that it articulates, and vis-à-vis other possible interpretations. Simply put, and keeping in mind Bertram’s broad understanding of interpretative praxes: dancing to music is not the same as listening to music, and even two people dancing will not move in exactly the same way. The autonomy of the interpretative praxis then means that each interpretation is an activity in its own right, not entirely determined by the work of art. In any interpretative praxis the recipient’s own productivity and creativity plays an essential part.

4. Conclusion: The Value of Interpretation

We started with a paradox of interpretation, and now end with what we might call a dual dialectic. In the first place, through a discussion of Kant and Adorno I argued that it is precisely the conceptlessness of art that provokes the need (on the side of the artwork) and the desire (on the side of the interpreter) of interpretation. Adorno once compared art to the ‘purloined letter’ from Edgar Allan Poe’s story, which is at once visible and hidden, or rather is hidden *because* it is clearly visible. A work of art can only be understood in and on its own terms, since it is a thing that has no clear purpose and does not fit in any existing cognitive schema. Works of art refer to, question, and reflect on their own being, their own materiality, and to that extent express an excess of meaning, beyond both their own ‘thingliness’ and beyond the comprehension of the recipient. This is what Adorno calls the the ‘enigmatic character’ (*Rätselcharakter*) of the work of art. But precisely because the work of art is enigmatic, there is the need for interpretation, even if it that means that it is, in Adorno’s words, “their incomprehensibility that needs to be comprehended” (Adorno 2004, 157).

However, in our attempt to articulate meaning – an attempt that never fully and definitely succeeds – we also gain meanings that can cast a new and different light on the world, and on our own lives. This is the second dialectic, that refers to the autonomy of interpretative practices as particular articulations of the work. An understanding of autonomy that, following Bertram, consists precisely in acknowledging and underlining the continuity between artistic and interpretative activities, as well as the continuity between these practices and other forms of human praxis. When dealing with art, i.e. when interpreting, in any of its various forms, a work of art, we engage in practices that have significance beyond the realm of art. Bertram writes that “other practices in the world come to be permeated by those interpretive activities that relate to the artwork” (Bertram 2019, 148, emphasis mine). As we connect other practices (bodily, perceptive, emotional and symbolic) to our interpretative practices, we tend to renegotiate these other practices, redefining or reconfirming them. We might perceive the world in a different way after visiting an exhibition, consider the movements that we make or the words that we use differently after experiencing a dance performance or reading poetry. Ways of seeing or moving, provoked by the challenge (*Herausforderung*) that the work of art poses, can have meaning in the world outside art, in the same way that thinking about works of art, the meanings we derive from them, can have a profound impact on our lives. This is precisely what makes interpretative practices not only meaningful, but moreover also invaluable.

University of Groningen, The Netherlands

Notes

¹ As Roger Scruton puts it: “[M]y words are only a gesture, [while] the real meaning of the painting is *bound up with, inseparable from*, the image. [...] The meaning does not reside in a content that could be identified just anyhow” (Scruton 2011, 93).

² See also Adorno 2004, 104: “Nature is beautiful in that it appears to say more than it is. To wrest this more from that more’s contingency, to gain control of its semblance, to determine it as semblance as well as to negate it as unreal: This is the idea of art.”

³ Cf. Baudelaire’s poem *Correspondences*: “Nature is a temple, where the living / Columns sometimes breathe confusing speech; / Man walks within these groves of symbols, each / Of which regards him as a kindred thing”, or the famous final lines from Rilke’s poem ‘Archaic Torso of Apollo’: “For there is no place / that does not see you. You must change your life.”

⁴ “If finished works only become what they are because their being is a process of becoming, they are in turn dependent on forms in which their process crystallizes: interpretation, commentary, and critique.” (Adorno 2004, 245)

⁵ This also explains why Adorno is so critical about the notion of ‘cultural goods’, which he considers as a neutralization of art.

⁶ Indeed, as Adorno writes, “no artwork is an undiminished unity” (Adorno 2004, 138).

⁷ “I characterize this process as articulation because it involves orienting one’s own activity toward the relations that are contained in the artwork” (Bertram 2019, 130).

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