Locating the Viewer in Formalist Aesthetic Theory and French Neoclassical Art

I

With upheld hands, the ancient Roman Horatius administers the oath [1]. He swears his sons to defend Rome and defeat the champions of Alba. He presents them with weapons that his aged and enervated body can no longer skillfully wield; but why the weapons and why the oath? An international crisis has forced itself on his domestically tranquil life. Cattle rustling between the kingdoms of Rome and Alba have brought political tensions to a head. But rather than resolve the dispute by going to war, three champions from each country have been selected to fight to the death: the Horatii and the Curiati. Those left standing shall be declared the winners thereby resolving an international dispute. They shall receive the honors due to heroes who managed to avert a national crisis and established peace.

II

Jacques Louis David’s most famous painting *Oath of the Horatii* (1785) packs all this melodrama beautifully into a single work of art [1]. In one deft stroke David manages to represent the moment of highest dramatic action, the image most pregnant with meaning from the narrative. Given the represented moment, we know what has gone before and are aware of what will soon take place, although, interestingly, this particular scene is not to be found among any of the ancient narratives (Crow 213).

But if that were not enough, the painting abounds with ironic twists brought on by a number of entangling alliances. To the right we see Camilla a sister to the Horatii who is also betrothed to one of the Curiati. She swoons and nearly faints as she leans her
head against the shoulder of her sister-in-law Sabina, who is, interestingly, a sister to the
Curiatii.

III

In 1785, Jacques Louis David exhibited the Oath of the Horatii at the French
Salon. Public reaction to the work was euphoric but unsettling for many a conservative
critic, who felt such lavish praise for a living artist’s work ought to be reserved for the
masters such as Titian, Poussin, or Reubens (Crow 214, 215).

But the critics had no one to blame but the French Academy. David’s work was
emblematic of the neo-Pousinist revival that embodied many of the formal, compositional,
and above all subject considerations advocated by the Academy (Roberts 26). French art-
going society was conditioned to view ancient subjects as examples of inspired heroism
and sacrifice that were necessary to maintaining the state, and David delivered.
Propagandistic, heroic, and didactic, the Oath of the Horatii was a fine example of the
type of grand historical painting designed for the betterment of society and the
maintaining of a healthy social order (Roberts 18).

Though most Salon attendees would have known of the ancient narrative sources
that inspired David’s Oath of the Horatii very few were probably aware of the historical
assumptions operating behind the artwork. Eighteenth-century France saw itself in the
model of ancient Rome, a place where duty to the state was founded on an intricate web
of pietas. Piety to the gods and above all piety to the state were the greatest civic virtues,
and the taking of an oath was certainly construed by enlightened Frenchmen as insurance
against the self-indulgent, sentimental human weaknesses that could potentially threaten
the security of any state, least of all Rome. If only French art could successfully teach
such values and engage the enlightened viewer in a way necessary to their moral transformation. This was the challenge that confronted many a graduate of the French Academy and David was no exception.

In taking on this challenge, David’s *Oath of the Horatii* was a resounding success. In its euphoria over David’s masterpiece, French society ably unpacked the political meaning of the *Oath of the Horatii* largely because it was a culturally literate audience existing at the brink of revolution. The French liberal class possessed the power to invest their own lives with meaning through imaginatively connecting with an ancient mythic past. Informed connections between viewer and art, however, required an awareness of historical context and a conceptual understanding of what was represented in the *Oath of the Horatii*, as opposed to the viewer’s mere awareness of the compositional elements ordered in the work. Represented figures, gestures, their spatial positioning, the representation of severe architecture and clothing were recognizable objects and found meaningful to the extent they deeply resonated with certain “factual beliefs and moral attitudes” of its audience (Eaton 12). Art in the service of politics essentially defined French academic art; and that the *Oath* sought to inspire and express political loyalty was something “hardly new” (qtd. in Roberts 18).

IV

Among academic artists of the time, including David, was a consistently held belief about what art *is* and should do. In his aesthetic writings, Leo Tolstoy gave content to such a definition, and though it comes to us by a variety of names *Emotionalism* seems the most appropriate. According to Tolstoy, art simply *is* expressed emotion communicated in a publicly sensuous medium (Weitz 171).
Many may be aware of the medical and biological analogies Tolstoy expresses in his definition, but few may know the reasons why he accepted Emotionalism as a necessary and sufficient condition for art (Eaton 11). It has, in part, to do with Immanuel Kant, and the power of his aesthetic writings produced in the late eighteenth century. Just five years following the exhibition of David’s *Oath of the Horatii*, Kant was to formulate probably the most convincing defense of formal beauty as the defining quality in art. In the *Critique of Judgment* (1790), Kant argues that what induces disinterested pleasure is the viewer’s perception of the purposive way the formal properties in art come together independent of whatever the artwork may represent, or even if the artwork actually exists.

What is also necessary to the experience of disinterested pleasure is the exclusion of one’s beliefs because all values, concepts, or purposes are redolent with interest for the object. Once eliminated are we then justified, according to Kant, in claiming any aesthetic judgment to be universally binding (46-48). For someone like Tolstoy, the Christian convert, Kant’s hedonistic whisperings and the exclusion of religious beliefs in art must have seemed tantamount to heresy.

V

Kantian formalism and Tolstoy’s *Emotionalism* are theories of art capable of delivering compelling, forceful accounts of an artwork. Let us first consider *Emotionalism*. As a necessary and sufficient condition of art, *Emotionalism* entails a fusion of subject matter with formal and ideological concerns. For instance, in the *Oath of the Horatii*, David orders line and color to express political ideas. Strong, vertical, erect lines sharpened by advancing reds contrast sharply with the soft muted tonality of
the women [1]. Cast in soft-curvilinear lines the action of the women is set largely within
inaction, especially when compared with the angular, dynamic force lines of the men.
Depicted in enervated poses, weakened, effeminate, and weeping Camilla exists nearly to
the point of unconsciousness. Sabina is equally distraught perhaps over the thought of
losing her husband, even though the thought of a dead brother may be equally distressing.

Is it any wonder why David’s painting exists as a commentary on the status of
women, one echoed by many individuals over the question of women in pre-
revolutionary French society? While certainly not a view endorsed by all, still, David’s
masterpiece does forward a feminine thesis. Women in the world of the Horatii are
symbolic of the type of virtues that could never successfully establish a nation. Love,
tenderness, perhaps despair, stand in stark contrast to the manly heroic virtues
symbolized in the men, such as valor, strength, courage, loyalty, and above all duty over
self-interest.

The second theory worth considering is Kantian formalism. When aesthetic
issues of beauty and disinterested pleasure are tantamount in assessing a work of art,
formalist aesthetics rely less on a publicly informed viewer than Emotionalism. The
disinterested viewer of art gives no weight to deeply felt social values; indeed, the
Kantian formalist contends that interest only inhibits access to a purely formal
contemplation of the work of art. Rather a strictly formal consideration of the artwork
targets the "purposive" way in which the qualities for instance in The Oath of the Horatii
come together and produce in the viewer disinterested pleasure [1].

The Oath of the Horatii is a paragon of formalist standards in art whose planned
spatial organization, unity, and delineated form seem to extol the Kantian virtue of design.
As we confront the work, our feelings of aesthetic pleasure emerge from the strictly formal features the mind alone intuits. Elements of delineated form, outline, and contour create a compact composition that conveys a powerful sense of unity. Its plan is essentially pyramidal, the apex being the point at which all receding orthogonal lines converge. The spatial structure conveys to the viewer a sense of continuous space. The paved floor is founded on a particular linear organization, as the implied lines recede to and converge upon the painting’s focal point: Horatius’ upheld hands. Space is consistently and logically ordered throughout.

VI

David’s *Oath of the Horatii* shows how formalism and *Emotionalism* are equally valid ways of interpreting an art work. An emotionalist reading of the *Oath of the Horatii*, for instance, assumes the culturally informed viewer comes before the work a witness to the profound subject matter that is designed to morally fixate and transform the viewer. The viewer sees in art the relevance of allegory, the importance of symbol, and above all how the desire for beauty and perfection in art ultimately corresponds to something deep within themselves. On the eve of the revolution, the committed revolutionary would have seen in the *Oath of the Horatii* an evocation of the same values inspiring them: to forsake self-interest and strongly unite with others in a single purpose or cause, just as the brave Horatii united in the greater causes of defense and liberty. Thus emotionalist considerations of the artwork rely on the values, historical contexts, and emotional capacities of the viewer.

On the other hand, formalism gives no weight to contextual elements when judging the work of art. Indeed, what is represented and how its elements convey
emotional, psychological, or ideological concerns merely get in the way of the
disinterested pleasure induced by a purely formal consideration of the artwork.

VII

Why two different art theories seem to be mutually exclusive is an interesting
theoretical question on which to reflect, and a good place to start our reflections would be
the underlying notions of “definition” and “concept” that informs eighteenth-century
French academic art as well as Kantian aesthetic theory.

In an article written some fifty years ago, Morris Weitz suggests that if progress is
to be made in the field of aesthetics then our traditional notions of definition and concept
must change as well. The philosophical efforts of antiquity loom large on this point.
Plato believed the conceptual analysis of terms like justice, piety, or even art, ought to be
just as precise as the analysis of geometrical concepts. In this regard, definitions are
simply a linguistic enumeration of the necessary and sufficient conditions belonging to
any concept and therefore ought to be as equally precise as concepts. Weitz calls these
types of concepts “closed” and suggests that it is the source of the problem behind the art
theories under consideration here. Why Kant and the Academy seem to be at
loggerheads over the essential property in art is precisely because they both believe in a
different set of necessary and sufficient conditions for art generally: significant form
versus emotional content.

To resolve this contradiction Wietz suggests we look to definitions of art not as
statements of essential properties that are incorrigible but as a description of a bundle of
similar traits and that we come to know what art is in virtue of those similarities. Such
conditions could acknowledge art to be the product of skilled labor, or see it is an artifact,
or as a product of the imagination and ingenuity. What is important, suggests Wietz, is that the criteria for recognition are corrigible. A modern example would be Marcel Duchamp’s work *Fountain* (1917). In *Fountain*, Duchamp essentially declares a urinal to be “art,” but by doing so he shows how the criterion of art can change and expand to include new conceptions, innovations, and movements heretofore thought unimaginined in art, such as declaring a urinal to be art. This is what the history of art teaches us about art. Its essence is to have no essence at all!

According to Weitz, art is an “open” concept (176). New art forms and movements constantly challenge our accepted notions of art and its practices, and have done so throughout time. Indeed art’s adventurous and rebellious character rejects any logically exhaustive set of conditions describing its essential nature, which formalism and *Emotionalism* attempt to do (Weitz 176). In the case of both, each definition professes to be an authoritative position on the question of “what is art?” However, neither of these definitions can be accepted as definitive about the nature of art since both mutually exclude that which is relevant to a full appreciation of art such as the *Oath of the Horatii* demonstrates. On the one hand, the *Oath of the Horatii* does possess significant form and a plastic ordering of elements that are pleasurable to look at independent of whatever they seem to represent. On the other hand, the *Oath of the Horatii* still communicates powerful human emotions in its affirmation of other concepts, including duty over self-interest, heroic patriotism over cowardice, and the taking of an oath even at the peril of one’s own life. What is motivating each definitional formulation ought to be the subject of real concern according to Weitz. The value of both formalism and *Emotionalism* is the power of returning to what has been neglected in art theory. In an age when
representational elements become paramount in painting, the discovery of significant form in art alerts us *not* to a missed essential condition in art but a “return” to that which has been forgotten and excluded in art, significant form.
Works Cited


