ISSN 0897-2346

SOUTHWEST PHILOSOPHY REVIEW

The Journal of
The Southwestern Philosophical Society

Volume 10, Number 2

July, 1994

SOUTHWEST PHILOSOPHY REVIEW

Southwest Philosophy Review is published twice annually by the Southwestern Philosophical Society at Westminster College. The journal is a forum for philosophical inquiry and welcomes contributions from all philosophical perspectives.

Annual subscription rates are $20.00 for individuals and $30.00 for institutions. Add $15.00 for foreign postage. Available back issues may be purchased for $15.00 each.

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AESTHETIC ALIENATION AND THE ART OF MODERNITY

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> The world pictured by the modern artist is, like the world mediated upon by the existential philosopher, a world where man is a stranger.
>
> —William Barrett, *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy* (1958)

> He [Hegel] did not have the feeling of being plunged into a challenging world of alienation in his time, as we do today when confronted by the production of abstract and nonobjective art.
>
> —Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Relevance of the Beautiful" (1986)

Introduction

Not long ago the walls of the world's great art museums were covered with realist portraiture, landscapes, and sacred scenes. That was pretty much the extent of canvas art. During the last hundred years, however, the scope of museum collections has become much more diverse. One can still find a lifelike portrait by Rubens, an idyllic landscape by Constable, or a sublime Christ scene by Raphael. Indeed, there even seems to be a bias towards realist art, what the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty called the "objectivist" prejudice.[1] It is as though we expect art to function as a description of the world in which we live. But museums have also become showcases for modern painting, that is, so-called abstract painting. Works of this sort seem to be disengaged from the recognizable features of our everyday world, from the same features that enable us to feel that we belong to this world, and thus seem to resist our objectivist prejudice.[2] In its extreme form, this detachment from the surrounding world appears to be nothing less than an obliteration of the familiar, a disruption in the man-world relationship. References to familiar things are no longer evident. With no clue as to what is represented, such painting exhibits an "infidelity to the familiar."[3] But if abstract painting renounces the world of physical appearance as its starting point, our feeling of being at home in that world may give way to the feeling of alienation that is alluded to by Barrett and Gadamer.

A sense of estrangement was surely felt by much of the viewing public when these paintings made their debut on the art scene. Their struggle to

orient each painting in two-dimensional space, so as to find some recognizable object and keep their objectivist perspective, was nothing less than an encounter with something alien. But what about all the generations of viewers that have followed them? Are we less likely to experience aesthetic alienation? In this paper, I propose to show that aesthetic alienation is less likely to be experienced by present-day "objectivist" viewers of abstract art as long as their cognitive funds are gradually enriched by the scientific and technological advances of the twentieth century. This is because such enriched funds, by providing a particular mode of access to the world, allow today's spectators to recognize and identify much more of the pictorial content of paintings that those viewers who first confronted the works of abstract painters.

Part One: Abstract Painting

Let us begin by considering the sort of art that is commonly associated with aesthetic alienation, namely, abstract painting. In spite of the fact that the Romanticism of John Constable's East Anglia landscapes is easily distinguished from the Abstract Expressionism of Clyfford Still's asymmetrical planar formations, it is important to note that artists and art historians have found themselves in a quandary over the nature of abstract art. The art historian Marcel Brion reminds us of this difficulty in the following passage:

> Few terms in the vocabulary of the history of art lend themselves so much to confusion and equivocation as the word "abstract." This is because no valid definition of it actually exists and, even more so, because there is no agreement about the nature of the works to which one can apply the term.[4]

Yet much of this discussion contains certain adjectives designating the world of abstract art, terms like 'non-objective' and 'non-representational'.[5] Perhaps the best way to understand how these terms apply to abstract painting is to compare their application with the use of the terms 'objective' and 'representational' in describing realist painting, that is, painting that approaches "observation and portrayal of the day-to-day essence of things and beings, while adding to this objective truth as much as it can contain of the subjective feelings of the artist."[6]

Let us take, for example, the work of Winslow Homer (1836-1910), perhaps the most effective and well-known spokesman for American Realism. Homer's *Breezing Up* (1876) is a fine example of such art. He brings to life a scene in which three boys are out sailing with a Fisherman. It is objective and representational insofar as it is a portrayal of several

objects in recognizable form; the likeness between Homer's painted images and the physical objects is strong. Of course, there is much more to this painting than a set of images that resemble objects in the world. Homer gives us, among other things, a vivid perception of New England life as well as an expression of his warm love for nature. By focusing on recognition of features resembling things in the world, which is at the heart of realist (or naturalist) representation (in contrast to symbolic [or conventional] representation), we have underlined the importance of representation as it relates to the meaning of this work of art.[7]

If we construe meaning or the function of a sign to be referential, then meaning involves three terms: first, an object that functions as a sign or vehicle of meaning; second, another object that is meant by the sign; and third, an interpreter for whom the two objects are united by the relation of meaning.[8] In realist painting, then, we have an object in the form of a colored shape on the canvas, the sign, and another object, the referent of the sign, which is a thing in the world. In the case of *Breezing Up*, the representations (or signs) that Homer gives us are quite faithful to that which they signify. The waves, for instance, look like the waves that can be seen on the surface of any large body of water. But surely not so faithful that the painted waves that appear to splash against his sailboat are present-at-hand rather than represented, for they would never wet a viewer's outstretched hand. "No painting," it is said, "is as concrete as an object in nature, . . . "[9] The point here is not that Homer's waves fail to achieve three-dimensionality. Rather it is the point that the images or designs on the canvas (the signifiers), like the waves in *Breezing Up*, resemble physical objects in the world (the signified).

But not all paintings have representations as realistic as those of Homer's, which is to suggest that realism is a matter of degree. The aesthetician Monroe C. Beardsley makes this point in his *Aesthetics* when he writes that "representational design . . . [is] *more or less abstract*. . . . 'Abstract' is the converse of 'realistic,' in one of its senses: to say that A is a more abstract representation than B is the same as to say that B is more realistic than A."[10] Take, for example, Edvard Munch's *The Scream* (1893) and Georges Braque's *Houses and Trees* (1908). Munch's efforts are to turn away from the details of the publicly recognizable world to one that is distorted, bizarre, and fantastic. Similarly, we find Braque's geometrical simplifications to illustrate a belaboring of the familiar. Yet we continue to recognize many of the objects that serve as signs; for example, a screaming person and a landscape of trees and buildings respectively. In other words,

the designs in both paintings have enough in common with the objects in the world to represent them. This is even true, though to a lesser extent, of works by Wassily Kandinsky. At first glance, his *Improvisation No. 30* (1913) appears to be nothing more than "chaos" on canvas, but which, upon prolonged examination, provides us with a few images that resemble, among other things, two canon.

The "infidelity to the familiar," however, can become so excessive that there seems to be nothing less than an obliteration of all worldly form. The psychologist of art Rudolf Arnheim echoes and reinforces this point when he writes:

> Art has become incomprehensible. Perhaps nothing so much as this fact distinguishes art today from what it has been at any other place or time. Art has always been used, and thought of, as a means of interpreting the nature of world and life to human eyes and ears; but now the objects of art are apparently among the most puzzling implements man has ever made. Now it is they that need interpretation.[11]

This is also acknowledged by Brion, who suggests that this infidelity is common in works of abstract art, since they do not seek out their forms among those already existent in the world. There is, so to speak, a radical upheaval in the artist's relationship with nature, resulting in what appears to be artistic creation *ex nihilo* (owing nothing to objective or external reality).[12] Taken to its extreme, only forms like geometrical figures would be used, which means that the artist considers only "two-dimensional space, a plane surface, and rejecting any spatial illusionism or even any allusion at all to a third dimension."[13]

This apparent obliteration is found in the work of Abstract Expressionists like those of the New York School in the late forties and fifties (Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Mark Tobey, among others). The school was an attempt to liberate art from the need to present an object; a shift away from "things" and an emphasis on the "incorporeal field."[14] Whether we look at Pollock's *Blue Poles* (1963), Rothko's *Red, White, and Brown* (1903), or Tobey's *Harvest* (1958), what we find is nothing like the realist paintings that incorporate the familiar objects of the world. As James K. Feibleman notes, it is small wonder that some have defined non-objective painting as "bare of representative meaning and stripped to the minimum of content."[15]

Part Two: Aesthetic Alienation

This steering away from realist painting may not come without exacting a very high price, however. Whereas we feel a certain familiarity with what is depicted in realist painting, we often find non-representational painting to

be alien. Thus it should come as no surprise that philosophers like Barrett and Gadamer find aesthetic alienation to be a concomitant of our viewing modern or abstract art.

Eighteen years after the appearance of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer published *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*. Gadamer finds the alienation that arises from abstract art to be nothing less than a separation from the aesthetic aspect of the cultural life of society. It is defined in terms of an "enormous gap between the traditional form and content of Western art and the ideals of contemporary artists."[16] Form and content are both crucial in this regard. The strict adherence to traditional form, which included an uncompromising respect for linear perspective, solidity, and three-dimensionality, has been made incidental, if not altogether repudiated by modern non-representational artists beginning with the Cubist movement in the early 1900s. This response, according to Gadamer, was the start of a profound transformation in art, for it "led to the total elimination of any reference to an external object of the process of artistic creation."[17] In addition, there was the break with traditional content, which construed man as a rational animal living in a familiar and intelligible world. According to Barrett, then, this break with tradition means that

> everything is questionable, problematic. . . . Hence the themes that obsess both modern art and existential philosophy are the alienation and strangeness of man in his world; the contradictoriness, feebleness, and contingency of human existence; the central and overwhelming reality of time for man who has lost his anchorage in the eternal.[18]

Although this wholesale divorce from tradition may be overstated, Gadamer is nevertheless convinced of its importance:

> It remains an open question whether or not this denial of our realistic expectations is ever really total. But one thing is quite certain: the naive assumption that the picture is a view—like that which we have daily in our experience of nature or of nature shaped by man—has clearly been fundamentally destroyed. We can no longer see a Cubist picture or a nonobjective painting at a glance, with a merely passive gaze. We must make an active contribution of our own and make an effort to synthesize the outlines of the various planes as they appear on the canvas. Only then, perhaps, can we be seized and uplifted by the profound harmony and rightness of a work, in the same way as readily happened in earlier times on the basis of a pictorial content common to all.[19]

The most cursory reading of Gadamer's works, then, suggests that contemporary abstract and non-objective art is unfamiliar to us, and it is this unfamiliarity that is part and parcel of its alienating nature.[20] In the main, aesthetic alienation is an inability to relate to at least some works of art which

eventually leads to a feeling of separation, of estrangement, of disunity on the part of the viewer. In short, the viewer lacks the proper relatedness to these works and is separated from at least a portion of the cultural life of a society.[21] Regardless of the extent and intensity of this estrangement, its basis is always the same: a confrontation with the unfamiliar. The person gazing at the painting does not recognize the pictorial contents as portraying things in the world. The colored shapes on the canvas do not represent things for that person. It therefore lacks the sort of referential meaning that is associated with representational art. There is an object which is thought to function as a sign as well as an interpreter of this object. But there appears to be no object that is meant by the "sign," that is, a referent in the world. We have lost the amalgam of sign and referent.

Of course, some might argue that this definition of aesthetic alienation is too limited insofar as it only covers one sort of alienation, that is, the alienation that stems from an absence of any sort of identification of the kind of object we are dealing with, whether it be a sailboat, a fisherman, or blue sky. What it does not include, they might argue (and rightly so), is aesthetic alienation with regard to how something is portrayed. A feminist aesthetician, for example, might argue vehemently that she experiences a feeling of separation, of estrangement, of disunity whenever she views one of the earliest treatments of the female nude in the Renaissance, that is, Sandro Boticelli's *The Birth of Venus* (after 1482). In short, she is unable to relate to this work of art, and is therefore alienated from it. Moreover, a similar response might be given by some men who view certain paintings. Indeed, some men may be no more able to relate to the brutality depicted in Nicolas Poussin's *The Rape of the Sabine Women* (before 1637) or the arrow riddled body of a saint in Andrea Mantegnas's *St. Sebastian* (about 1455-60) than women are able to relate to the naked women in Otto Dix's *Three Women* (1926) or the partially clothed females in Pablo Picasso's *Two Women Running on a Beach* (1922). To talk about "kinds" of aesthetic alienation, however, is not so much a challenge to the definition of aesthetic alienation that is used in this paper, especially since the paper's focus is abstract art, as it is a reminder that we can experience alienation even while we view the paintings of artists like Constable and Homer, albeit a less fundamental sort of alienation given that one must be able to identify an object before one can be alienated from it in terms of how the object is portrayed.

The key to appreciating this lapse in recognition, regardless of the kind of alienation, may be found in what Gadamer and others have said about perception, particularly aesthetic perception. Perception is not something

that lacks "cognitive strands," as Gadamer contends in the following passage:

> Perception is never a simple reflection of what is presented to the senses. . . . [P]erception conceived as an adequate response to a stimulus would never be a mere mirroring of what is there. For it would always remain an understanding of something as something. . . . Pure seeing and pure hearing are dogmatic abstractions which artificially reduce phenomena. Perception always includes meaning.[22]

In an extremely perceptive work dealing with this passage, Joel C. Weinsheimer notes that Gadamer clearly shows us

> that perception, even aesthetic perception, is not naturally or originally pure. It is "impure" in being always meaningful: we do not hear pure sounds but always a car in the street, a baby crying; we do not see pure colors and shapes but always a face, a knife, a wreath of smoke.[23]

But although Weinsheimer argues for the meaningfulness of perception, he does believe that a person can "look at something in such a way that it is 'just there,' so that we see just what is there."[24] The point here is not just that pure seeing is a distinct possibility. Rather it is the more important point that this sort of seeing is not primary but secondary. It is a derived seeing that is far removed from our utterances about this or that thing that reflect the richness of our language.

Gadamer is not alone in imbuing aesthetic perception with meaning. The cognitive nature of aesthetic perception is perhaps best presented in E. H. Gombrich's most influential work, *Art and Illusion*. The role of "mind sets" and "schemas," items which are akin to what I refer to as "cognitive funds," is indicated in his reference to the "myth of the innocent eye":

> Whenever we receive a visual impression, we react by docketing it, filing it, grouping it in one way or another, even if the impression is only that of an inkblot or a fingerprint. Roger Fry and the impressionists talked of the difficulty of finding out what things looked like to an unbiased eye because of what they called the "conceptual habits" necessary to life. But if these habits are necessary to life, the postulate of an unbiased eye demands the impossible. . . . The innocent eye is a myth.[25]

Seeing is, in short, never just a matter of registering unconceptualized sense-data. According to Gombrich, then, there is no separation between impressions and cognitive constructions.[26] The perception of art entails a person's cognitive fund, and it is this fund, acquired over many years, that allows a person to see what others, who have acquired a similar fund, see. To be sure, many of us have similar cognitive funds that allow us to see the same building, dog, or automobile. And this applies to paintings as well. If the distinctive characteristics of a sailboat are part of a person's cognitive

repertoire, that person is likely to recognize and identify some of the painted objects as sailboats when he or she looks at Homer's *Breezing Up*.

Interestingly enough, it is this notion of cognitive fund that links alienation to abstract art. Some persons feel alienated when they look at abstract paintings, either having no idea what to say or making comments such as "I don't understand art these days," because they find certain works of art to be unfamiliar or unrelated to the world they live in, and these works are unfamiliar or unrelated because they do not reflect the individual's cognitive fund. But must the present-day viewer of abstract art have such an experience? I believe this need not be the case. In fact, I believe today's audience is less likely to be alienated by such art.

Part Three: Aesthetic Alienation and Cognitive Funds

It might be argued that the experience of aesthetic alienation increases in scope and intensity as a person becomes more educated. If so, alienation is directly proportional to the growth of one's cognitive fund. "If alienation is more widespread now then it used to be," says Walter Kaufmann, "it is because more people receive more education today than formerly."[27] This is quite plausible given the earlier discussion of the kind of aesthetic alienation that stems from how something is portrayed to the objectivist viewer. It might be said of the female aesthetician, whose cognitive fund has undergone a change such that she now declares herself to be a "feminist aesthetician," that her study of gender relations has left her unable to relate to Boticelli's depiction of women, thereby explaining her alienation from his *The Birth of Venus*. The converse may also be true, however. A person may be less apt to experience aesthetic alienation as the scientific and technological achievements of the age are added to his or her cognitive stock. This is because the sorts of images that seemed to be unfamiliar or unrelated to the world are gradually identified as being a part of our world. This is not to say that no one undergoes the experience of alienation when viewing abstract art. But what was thought to be abstract and non-representational fifty years ago may not be construed as such today. As an acute observer of our age has put it:

> By the late twentieth century, in ways never before conceivable, images of the incomprehensibly small and the unimaginably large became part of everyone's experience. The culture saw photographs of galaxies and of atoms. No one has to imagine, with Leibniz, what the universe might be like on microscopic or telescopic scales—microscopes and telescopes made those images part of everyday experience.[28]

Such images, then, give us a point of reference for some of what we find in

abstract painting. This leads Feibleman to claim that non-objective art does represent, and therefore it is entirely inaccurate to conceive of it as non-representational. The representations differ from those found in the works of nineteenth-century Realists like Homer insofar as they are representations of abstractions that parallel the abstractions of the world of science.[29] What are thought of as non-objective works of art are not non-objective at all, but actually works of art that represent the less familiar world of science. And this can take place without the artist's intention of doing anything of the kind. As Feibleman puts it, when he remarks on the work of various members of the New York School:

> Pollock's paintings endeavor to attain to a kind of qualitative chaos, a state of perfect disorder. They could as well have represented a photomicrograph of cat cortex, or the paths of the molecules in a heated gas enclosed within a rectangular vessel. With a little patient searching among photographic plates of distant galaxies, one might find that the paintings of de Kooning and of Tobey are representational after all.[30]

We can clarify this broadening of the scope of representational painting to include some, if not all, works thought to be abstract, by citing specific examples in which isomorphisms can be discerned between images from artists and images from scientists. The works of two American artists, the Abstract Expressionist Barnett Newman and the Constructionist Charles Biederman clearly support this expansion. Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (1950, 1951) is an extremely large canvas (eight by eighteen feet), the background of which is a single homogeneous color, a monochromatic field of cadmium red, divided by "zips" or exceedingly thin strips of the same color or contrasting color that split the huge red expanse vertically. At first glance, it may not offer the viewer with a familiar image, with a configuration of paint arranged on the canvas that resembles and, thus, represents something in the world. But the situation is much different for the viewer who is well-acquainted with atomic absorption spectroscopy. *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* resembles that portion of the dark-line spectrum of sunlight that has a wavelength of approximately 700 nm (the red band of the spectrum). The only difference is that Newman's painting has vertical strips of red, white, and yellow-brown, whereas the dark-line spectrogram of sunlight has dark "Fraunhofer" lines. *Construction* (1940), by Biederman, is a much smaller work made of painted wood and metal rods that crisscross one another. Again, looking at this work may not remind the viewer of anything in the world. Having some knowledge of X-ray diffraction, however, will provide the viewer with a cognitive fund that will at least make it possible that he or she will see a structural configuration in this work of art that is similar to the

divergent beam X-ray diffraction patterns from single crystals of chemical substances. Isomorphisms such as these, then, suggest that in at least some cases, what was once thought to be an escape from nature turns out to be nothing of the kind. They are more or less a means of glimpsing and comprehending the world that we live in.

To make the inference that a few isomorphisms demonstrate that abstract art in general is representational, of course, is another matter. Picking out a couple of works that are isomorphic is not sufficient to make such a generalization. Part of the problem, however, is that to become aware of these isomorphisms requires the appropriate cognitive fund, a fund that is only established after some study of the discipline. And this is something that few of us have over a wide range of disciplines. Yet to find considerable resemblance in the images offered to us by artists in paintings and mixed media projects by doing no more than pointing to a few spectrograms and X-ray diffraction patterns says something about the possibility of finding further isomorphisms. The investigation of things large (for example, galaxies) and small (for example, particles) provides us with innumerable instances of similarity and, thus, familiarity. It is just a matter of having a cognitive fund that is tuned to such imagery.[31]

Of course, some philosophers might suggest caution at this point. One such philosopher is Beardsley, who distinguishes between suggestive and non-suggestive non-representational painting. Beardsley appears to be critical of any attempt to expand the scope of representational art, not simply because he seems unwilling to reduce the number of notable and distinctive characteristics that a design must have in common with an object in nature for the design to depict something, and hence, to represent something, but because he thinks that not having enough of these characteristics still allows a design to at least *suggest* an object in the world without representing it.[32] So it is not an all or none proposition for him. Abstract expressionist paintings, for instance, have "areas that suggest, however vaguely, such things as insects, female bodies, trees, machinery, and rocks, though without representing them, and the suggestions of different areas cohere to some degree."[33] This is suggestive non-representational art, exemplified by such works as Willem de Kooning's *Woman and Bicycle* (1952-53) and *Woman as a Landscape* (1953-55). However, there are non-suggestive non-representational designs: "They are the designs that are mostly limited to straight lines, a few primary colors, and quite regular and simple shapes without depth—those that are frequently called 'geometrical'. . . ."[34] Beardsley would, no doubt, find Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* to be an

exemplar of such a design, because it has an insufficient number of notable and distinctive characteristics in common with anything, including the spectrogram of sunlight, for it to be either representational or suggestive. With regard to the latter, the insufficient number of characteristics would make it more of a case of "reading something into the design." As Beardsley writes about such art,

> I suppose one could say that a square on the bathroom floor suggests a box, a cabin, or a barn, but this would be an odd and unnecessary way of speaking. If you cannot connect these suggestions with suggestions from other shapes in the pattern, it would be more like reading something into the design than seeing what is there.[35]

My response to his discussion is twofold. First, Beardsley does not make clear how many and what kind of characteristics a design must have in common with a particular object for it to represent or suggest. Where do we draw the line between representational and non-representational paintings? Furthermore, does this not have something to do with the sort of cognitive fund that a person is working from? It is unlikely that a viewer will see what appears to be a barn when he or she looks at *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, though not something that can be rejected out of hand. But for the viewer to say that it resembles the red band of the dark-line spectrogram of sunlight becomes more likely if he or she is familiar with absorption spectroscopy.

And second, even if we accept Beardsley's distinction, representation and suggestion still have something in common, that is, they both involve familiar characteristics between the design and an object in the world. And this is important, for whether an individual undergoes the experience of aesthetic alienation is dependent upon having an objectivist prejudice as well as a cognitive fund that does not allow the viewer to be familiar with the sorts of objects that may be referred to by the painting.

A note should be interjected here concerning the conditions of aesthetic alienation, for what has been discussed so far might suggest that the only way in which a viewer with an objectivist prejudice can become less vulnerable to aesthetic alienation is by enhancing his or her cognitive fund through learning about the latest scientific discoveries and technological innovations. But to say this would be to unduly restrict the scope of cognitive enhancement and to associate it with just one condition, i.e., the familiarity condition. The problem with this is that cognitive enhancement can also occur by learning about art—its technical aspects, its history, and its artists—which could replace the objectivist prejudice with an approach that is less encumbered by a search for the familiar. Thus, learning about art may have the beneficial effect of making the viewer less likely to experience

alienation. But for the great mass of people who do not partake in this sort of cognitive enhancement, it will be through the assimilation of knowledge about science and technology that will underlie their increasing resistance to aesthetic alienation.

Following Feibleman's line of argument, then, we find the images of science and technology in the abstractions of today's art, allowing us to become attached to the world without the experience of aesthetic alienation. It is by stressing the dyad of resemblance-representation that we find more and more that is familiar in what we see when we look at abstract paintings. With an enriched conceptual fund, an objectivist viewer may not only say "I see an expanse of red," but he or she may say "That looks like a spectrogram." It is this enrichment, perhaps more than anything else, which helps to solidify our attachment to abstract works of art.

Conclusion

To whatever degree of abstraction a painting may attain, the worldliness of that painting is measured by the degree to which its appreciators undergo the experience of alienation. The more a person's cognitive fund is enriched by the assimilation of modern scientific discoveries and technological innovations, the less likely he or she will experience aesthetic alienation. If our cognitive funds are truly fashioned in this way, and if alienation is in inverse proportion to our familiarity with the images that we see when we look at a painting, then the appropriation of science and technology into our lives will lead to a reduction in aesthetic alienation.[36]

This implication leads me to the following final thought. What has been discussed so far is twentieth-century Western art and society. But what about art forms of other societies? It is not too terribly difficult to imagine a people who are totally immersed in, for example, traditional Amazonian art rather than the cosmopolitan art of Brazil. And to make it more interesting, let us suppose that the traditional art is representational. Would anyone in such a traditional society experience aesthetic alienation? Would there be persons estranged from at least a portion of the cultural life of their community? Probably. In this case, however, the distinguishing characteristic between those who are alienated and those who are not would be closely associated with the age of the individual insofar as the younger members of the community would not have sufficiently appropriated the knowledge of his or her forefathers through oral histories. Each of their cognitive funds would not be as developed as those of the elders of the community. To think, then, that a day will come when aesthetic alienation will be an experience of the past is to dwell upon the fantastic. There will always be those who feel

separated from some aesthetic aspect of their culture so long as there are differences in the cognitive funds of the members of the community.

Notes

[1] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, trans., with an Introduction by Richard C. McCleary (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 47. This prejudice is also reflected in John F. A. Taylor's *Design and Expression in the Visual Arts* (New York: Dover, 1964), pp. 221-22. He distinguishes between the primary and secondary images in a work of art. Artists, including modern artists, have emphasized primary images such as a particular arrangement of colors and shapes, whereas the inexperienced spectator has focused on the secondary images or the references to the corresponding objects in the world. Interestingly enough, Taylor's appeal to inexperience may be cast in terms of a "deficiency" in the cognitive fund of the spectator.

[2] John C. Gilmour, in *Picturing the World* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), alludes to this resistance when he asserts the following: "Paintings, and other art works, provide us with frameworks for seeing and thinking which may challenge prevalent interpretations of the world. Part of the public's shock on first encountering modern art reflected the divergence of its vantage points from common interpretations of nature, human perception, and social reality" (p. 19).

[3] Such infidelity does not imply that abstract art is inferior to other kinds of art.

[4] Marcel Brion, "Abstract Art: Origin, Nature and Meaning," *Philosophy Today* 5 (Winter 1961), p. 267.

[5] For a discussion of these terms, see Frances B. Blanshard, *Retreat from Likeness in the Theory of Painting*, 2d ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1949).

[6] Marcel Brion, *Art of the Romantic Era: Romanticism, Classicalism, Realism* (New York: Praeger, 1966), p. 10.

[7] Notice that I have not weighted the intention of the artist qua representer to represent something, but instead have elevated the intention of the viewer qua representer of sorts so as to make the claim that the signifiers represent such and such simply because of the resemblance the former has with the latter. This is consistent with John Hospers's claim that "whenever one item in our experience stands for another, the first item is said to *represent* the other, or to be a symbol [natural or conventional] of the other, while the thing symbolized or represented is called the referent of the symbol. . . . [T]he sense in which a painting represents Napoleon cannot thus be dismissed. The sense I am speaking of here is the . . . sense of 'subject matter' . . . if a work of art has a given thing as its subject-matter, it is said to imitate or represent that thing, and hence to symbolize it. . . ." (John Hospers, *Meaning and Truth in the Arts* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1946], pp. 29 and 40)

[8] Arthur Berndtson, *Art, Expression, and Beauty* (1969; reprint ed., Huntington, N. Y.: Robert E. Krieger, 1975), p. 28. For an interesting discussion of form,

representation, and meaning, see Arnold Isenberg, "Perception, Meaning, and the Subject Matter of Art," *Journal of Philosophy* 41 (October 1944): pp. 561-75.

[9] Berndtson, p. 39. Put differently, "every work of art 'abstracts' in some degree from the particular traits of objects expressed" (John Dewey, *Art as Experience* [G. P. Putnam and Sons, 1934], p. 94).

[10] Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*, 2d ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981), p. 286.

[11] Rudolf Arnheim, *Toward a Psychology of Art: Collected Essays* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), p. 7. Other relevant works of Arnheim's include *New Essays on the Psychology of Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) and *Visual Thinking* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).

[12] Brion, "Abstract Art," p. 267.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Leonard Shlain, *Art and Physics: Parallel Visions in Space, Time, and Light* (New York: William Morrow, 1991), p. 245. This shift, according to Shlain, is related to an analogous transformation in physics—an emphasis on the field instead of the particle.

[15] James K. Feibleman, "Concreteness in Painting: Abstract Expressionism and After . . . ," *Philosophy Today* 5 (Winter 1961), p. 258. This description of non-objective art leads some to claim that not all such art is the same. Berndtson, for instance, distinguishes abstract art from formal art. He characterizes abstract those works of art that vaguely represent or attempt to represent objects of our ordinary experience, and formal those works that possess no representational content, works that are essentially constructions of colored shapes that have absolutely no reference to nature (Berndtson, *Art, Expression and Beauty*, p. 40). Berndtson's abstract art—formal art distinction is similar to what we find in Jerome Ashmore's "Some Differences between Abstract and Non-Objective Painting," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 13 (June 1955), pp. 486-95. Ashmore distinguishes between two modes of painting, abstract (in which the subject matter employs a real physical object) and non-objective (in which the subject matter employs no such object).

[16] Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Relevance of the Beautiful," in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, trans. Nicholas Walker and edited with an Introduction by Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 12.

[17] Ibid., p. 8.

[18] William Barrett, *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy* (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1958), p. 56.

[19] Gadamer, "The Relevance of the Beautiful," p. 8.

[20] Ibid., p. 37.

[21] Some writers have explored the relationship between alienation and pathology or the lack of pathology. See Walter Kaufmann, Introduction to *Alienation*, by Richard Schacht (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1970), p. xliv.

[22] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), pp. 81-2.

[23] Joel C. Weinsheimer, *Gadamer's Hermeneutics: A Reading of "Truth and Method"* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 94.

[24] Ibid., p. 95.

[25] E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1960), pp. 297-98.

[26] For discussions of Gombrich's position, see Gilmour, *Picturing the World*, pp. 58-68 and Israel Scheffler, *Science and Subjectivity*, 2d ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1982), pp. 24-25. For related views of perception, see Charles Biederman's notion of "consciousness of visualization" in his *Art As the Evolution of Visual Knowledge* (Red Wing, Minn.: Charles Biederman, 1948), p. 32; Norwood Russell Hanson's concept of the theory-ladenness of observation in *Patterns of Discovery: An Inquiry into the Conceptual Foundations of Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), pp. 4-30; and Stephen C. Pepper's idea of the funding of perception in his *The Basis of Criticism in the Arts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956), p. 64. This is not to say that Gombrich dispenses with visual interpretation, for he contends that "we interpret that x is a y," for example, when we are cognizant of conceptually grouping the visual impression that we receive when we look at x. Gombrich cites Bernard Berenson's description of the Palio in Siena found in his work *Seeing and Knowing* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1953) as an instance of interpretation. It is Berenson's "knowledge [or cognitive fund] that allows him to decide between these two interpretations [i.e., seeing people and seeing flowers] by testing them against the situation" (p. 328). But why Gombrich believes Berenson to be cognizant of his conceptualizing is baffling, for it is not clear why Berenson is not simply unaware and, thus, just "sees a y."

[27] Kaufmann, Introduction to *Alienation*, p. xxvi.

[28] James Gleick, *Chaos: Making a New Science* (New York: Viking, 1987), p. 116. See also James Gleick, *Nature's Chaos* (New York: Viking, 1990).

[29] Feibleman, "Concreteness in Painting," pp. 261-62. In a similar view, Andrew Carnduff Ritchie states in *Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America* (1951; reprint ed., New York: Arno Press, 1969), p. 14, that "there are some indications that many abstract artists reflect in their work an awareness, conscious or unconscious, of the new world of nature that is every day being revealed to us."

[30] Feibleman, "Concreteness in Painting," p. 262.

[31] This leads us to a most interesting, but difficult question: If abstract art contains images like those produced by science and technology, does it follow that the latter images are works of art? The issue at hand, then, is how do we define a work of art? One line of argument that has been taken in regard to the images of science and technology is the Institutional Theory of Art as proposed by philosophers such as George Dickie and Arthur C. Danto. Dickie defines art as the following: "(1) an artifact [and] (2) a set of aspects of which has had conferred upon it the status of candidate for appreciation by some person or persons acting on behalf of a certain social institution (the artworld)" (George Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic* [Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1974], p. 34). According to Dickie, natural

objects such as driftwood can also be considered as works of art. This is because artifactuality is conferred on an object. If this is so, then it would be consistent for Dickie to argue that a spectrogram and a photo of an X-ray diffraction pattern would become works of art if they were offered as candidates for appreciation. And this could be done by exhibiting these objects at the Chicago Art Institute. Instead of the "transfiguration of the commonplace," as Danto notes, what takes place is the "transfiguration of the scientific." See Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981). For objections to the Institutional Theory, see Oswald Hanfling, "The Problem of Definition," in *Philosophical Aesthetics: An Introduction*, ed. Oswald Hanfling (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), pp. 24-32 and Stephen Davies, *Definitions of Art* (Ithaca, NY.: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 78-141.

[32] Beardsley, *Aesthetics*, pp. 280-81.

[33] Ibid., p. 285.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Some may infer from what has been said that scientific images produce the same sort of alienation as art, and that such alienation can also be relieved through familiarity. But if alienation is brought about by confronting the unfamiliar as well as accepting the objectivist prejudice, then an analogous situation may not arise with regard to scientific images, for such a prejudice may not be part and parcel of our understanding of the scientific enterprise. Interestingly enough, this has an implication for aesthetic alienation, for one might argue that a reduction in this sort of alienation could be brought about by dispensing with the objectivist prejudice, that is, no longer expecting to see the familiar on canvas.

Editorial Policy

Each Winter issue of the *Southwest Philosophy Review* contains papers presented at the annual meeting of the Southwestern Philosophical Society. Papers in the Summer issue are selected by the editor, with the advice of referees, from open submissions to the *Review*. Comments on papers previously published in the *Review* are solicited and will be considered for publication.

Manuscripts should be submitted in triplicate and should conform to MLA standards with notes gathered at the end. The author's name should appear only on a separate cover page since papers are refereed anonymously. Manuscripts will be returned only if return postage is provided by the author. The *Review* subscribes to the Guidelines for Handling Manuscripts of the Association of Editors of Philosophy Journals.

Upon acceptance of a paper for publication, the author will be requested to provide the editor with a computer diskette holding the file of the manuscript in either Macintosh or MS-DOS format; Microsoft Word and WordPerfect data files are strongly preferred.

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