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Meaning and Interpretation

I have chosen to work with Chapter 3 "Meaning and Interpretation" of *Puzzles about Art*.[1] This is a very interesting and widely discussed topic. Art is as old as humankind, already cavemen carved representations of humans and animals into cave walls. The oldest known cave painting is actually more than 30 000 years old. This is not just historically interesting, but it also seems to suggest that art plays an important role in human culture.

In this essay, I will try to answer a few selected questions the author poses in the book. In particular questions such as: Should we value art because we learn from it? What sorts of things can be learned from it? And: Would it not be more efficient to acquire knowledge from textbooks? It seems that most people that have ever dealt with art would have their intuition telling them: yes, you can learn from art. And since I feel the same way, I will start with Aristotle and the *imitation theory of art*. This theory claims that artworks are imitations of things that can be found in the world. While Plato insists that art cannot be a source of knowledge, since imitation is not as accurate as the real objects, Aristotle claims that it is "natural and beneficial for humans to learn by imitating and also to learn from imitations that are artistically made."[2] Children, for example, learn almost everything through imitation: they learn how to walk, to talk,

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1 Battin, Margaret P., John Fisher, Ronald Moore, Anita Silvers. *Puzzles about Art. An Aesthetics Casebook.* New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc.,1989.
2 Ibid., p. 67.

to tie shoes, how to gesture, etc., etc. Aristotle points out that it often makes even more sense to learn through imitation through other, more direct/realistic ways. If someone wants to study the human anatomy, he, of course, does not use an actual human, instead he uses a model, or in other words: an imitation of the human body. There are even more reasons to accept the imitation theory. According to Aristotle, tragic poetry, for example, expresses general truths, things that are likely or certain to have happened, whereas history just speaks about a few, selected facts. And more: we do not need to see someone actually dying on stage in order to understand, au contraire, it might even distract and prevent us from learning or comprehending "those principles of probability or necessity that govern human activity."[3] So, one crucial aspect seems to be that products of art *have* to be different from real objects in the world, although they are imitating them. However, it is this gap between products of art and the real world, that allows us to learn from it.

According to Arthur Danto, this theory has to be extended in order to leave room for postmodern art, too. He agrees with the account of art given by Aristotle as long as it is only applied to art that was created *before* this epoch. Postmodern art, he states, tries to minimize the gap between art and real things.[4] *Readymades* by Marcel Duchamp are perfect examples for this claim. This, however, does not seem to corrupt Aristotle's theory. It is always possible to extend a theory. Or, in this case, it would also be a possibility to say that, according to this theory, readymades are simply not art. Unfortunately this theory has to deal with other, more persistent problems.

First, this theory implicitly claims that understanding an artwork means learning from

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3 Ibid., p. 68.
4 Ibid.

"the work as from a model or imitation of a real thing."[5] However, there are art media that do not seem to necessarily imitate something, such as music and textiles. And secondly, if art works by imitating, why is accuracy not a factor that distinguishes good from bad art? And would that mean, that a perfect copy of something is still art Even good art? That clearly does not seem to be the case though. One way of solving the first problem is to state it like this: Art is a collective term that includes many different kinds of art, such as paintings, sculptures, poetry, literature, music, textiles, etc. Aristotle not necessarily claimed that the imitation theory is applicable to all these kinds of art. His emphasis lied on visual art and poetry/literature, and these two branches of art fit perfectly fine into Aristotle's theory. Another argument is, that not being able to learn anything from one kind of art, does not automatically mean that it is impossible to learn from art at all.

The second problem, in my understanding, can be solved as well. It simply is a fallacy to think that only because art works by imitation, the imitation closest to reality is the most valuable work of art. In order to demonstrate this, I want to remind the reader of the children imitating his parents in order to learn how to walk. The child, let us call him Bob, apparently focuses on one certain aspect of the parents' behavior. Bob does not, and does not need to, copy or imitate *every*thing they do while walking. They might move their hands, they might talk, carry something, or even stumble. There is an endless list of possibilities. However, Bob chooses (most likely unconsciously) to only pay attention to what is actually necessary to walk, which is moving his legs and feet in a certain way, keep the balance, etc. So, it is not important at all, and it would not make it any more successful, if Bob imitated all the rest as well. In other words: Imitation, in my understanding, always involves the aspect of choosing or filtering, the purposive

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5 Ibid., p. 69

decision of leaving certain things or aspects out.

So, the result for right now is, that the question "Would it not be more efficient to acquire knowledge from textbooks?" can be answered with: Yes, most of the time it is more efficient to learn from a textbook which gives you cold facts, *but* not always. That became clear when Aristotle introduced the history example or the example of the actor actually dying on stage vs. just pretending to die in order to understand certain human feelings and reactions. Imagine a textbook that tells the reader what usually happens to him or others, when they see someone else dying. It would probably read similar to this: The observer's body starts shaking, he starts to produce cold sweat, his hearts beats faster, etc., etc., and if he knew and liked the dead person, he feels sad, starts to produce tears, and so forth. This is probably not even close to what happens in reality, but it serves my purpose. Imagine know, you see an actor pretending to die on stage. You maybe feel connected to his character, started to like him, got to know his friends, family and or background, and so on. It, most likely, will make you *feel* how it is to see someone dying, or in other words: *learn*, how it is, if someone you like dies. It seems quite apparent that art has a big advantage over textbooks or simply telling someone what happens.

The second questions "Should we value art because we learn from it?" can also be answered with: yes, we should. Although, it seems to depend on how one characterizes art. I do not recommend to just give a general account of art in order to answer this questions. As shown in this essay, the most likely candidates that can teach us something are visual arts and poetry/literature. That, however, does not mean that it is impossible for other kinds of art to be instructive whatsoever. It only means that in Aristotle's account, they do not have this property per se. Furthermore, this does not rule out the possibility that art can (or maybe even should) be

valued for other features as well. Many people like art, simply because it is beautiful or makes them feel good. Anyhow, this is not part of this essay.

The last question "What sorts of things can be learned from it?" a little more difficult to answer. It seems like there are many different aspects that come into play at this point. What role does the artist play? Is he the one that decides what his artwork is supposed to express? If so, how do we know for certain if we get his intention right? Let us assume, this is the case, the author or artist determines what the artwork expresses, its true meaning, so to speak. So, the only thing we could learn would be what he intended to express and also the various ways of doing so. There are two artists, for example, and both want to express a certain feeling. Artist A can do so by choosing certain colors and creating a plays of colors that somehow represent this feeling. Artist B chooses to paint a sad face with tears etc. So, summed up, art in this sense, can teach us creativity or problem solving skills by showing the various ways of representing one single object or feeling. It can also teach us the ability to understand other people's intentions as long as we have something like a guideline that actually informs us about the artists intentions. This, of course, is not always the case, but it does not need to be in order to be one of maybe many possible things we can learn from art.

Another way of approaching this problem is to leave the author's or artist's intentions out. This is the common approach in Literature Studies, for example. It it possible to see a text in regards to many different aspects, such as: what can we learn about society, what about moral conventions, history, the image of women, of men, foreigners, the role of religion etc., etc. And it seems as texts that become most appreciated, such as Goethe's Faust, for example, are usually works with many of these layers of information. Or in other words: there are many ways of

reading this text. The method used to do so is usually the method of the *hermeneutic procedure*. This approach actually give us many options. We can learn something about pretty much everything that was relevant at the time the text or artwork was made and/or about the time period it represents. Even though, the artist or author gives us these information unknowingly. Another advantage of this approach is that the results are objective. As long as the method used is applied correctly, the results are reproducible and verifiable. This, at the same times, can teach us to choose between different methods and to apply them correctly.

I am sure, this list is far from being complete. At this point, however, it already shows that we, indeed, can learn many different things from art. It is not even necessary that everyone shares the same idea or account of art. Creativity, problem solving skills, understanding intentions, information about history, culture, society etc., and correctly applying methods are, as shown, just a few things art can teach us.

So, in order to bring this essay to a conclusion, the only reasonable answer someone could give the Dean of the of Agriculture, who claims that nothing much, or perhaps nothing at all can be learned from art is: You are mistaken.