

TALKING ARTWORKS

An Epistemological Improvisation on Motives by Nietzsche

I will start this essay with a quotation from Professor Raymond Guess from a lecture on Nietzsche's Philosophy given at the University of Cambridge in 2013¹ The quoted extract is part of a broader talk about the attitude of Wagner and Nietzsche towards the need of constant remaking, re-evaluation, re-definition and re-view of phenomena:

"If the French aren't able by themselves now² to paint their own pictures that are at least as good or better than the ones that are lost [as they would be if the Louvre was bombed], they don't deserve to have the originals because they can only appreciate, and could only appreciate, the originals if they were themselves capable of actually producing paintings that are better than the paintings there [in the Louvre]. [...] If they couldn't do them better, they weren't really seeing the old ones correctly."

An extrapolation of this example, given earlier in the same lecture, would be the shorter one: Not a pianist who plays a piece can appreciate it but a composer who can write a better one.

These two assumptions would lead to two terrifying consequences: 1) that to those who truly understand an artwork, it says nothing new.³ Given that "understanding" and "seeing correctly" are interchangeable, not only appreciation and evaluation of artwork but a complete understanding of its genealogy first is needed, so that the out-doing of the old can be achieved, emitting further the weaknesses and accentuating at even greater strength its expression and influence. If the artwork says nothing new, it starts occupying a valuable (to be consistent with the above) but uninteresting place in our life - similar to the primer which is irreplaceable in the course of learning how to read and write, and for this reason highly valued, but once having its mission fulfilled, it becomes uninteresting. Still, its importance remains for all school beginners who may not appreciate it before perceiving the results of its use. In this way the object (a primer or an artwork) remaining the same, changes meaning to us: from exciting and unknown to understood and valued (for all the enlightening understanding it has once brought into our lives) but also tedious and boring.

From the above follows the next terrifying, but also amusing, consequence: 2) that the interest for the particular object (let us switch back to an artwork) is spread among those who misunderstand it, or at least do not see it yet in its entirety.

¹ This is the second of a series of lectures on Nietzsche given by Raymond Guess – now an emeritus professor. The example runs from 50:48 min up to 52:34 min. Full lecture available thanks to Kotti Everdene at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L0c5a6GB4jY>

² All underlining in citations is mine.

³ Nietzsche would not agree that correct understanding leads to the sterile uselessness of the understood thing in question. According to him, correct understanding empowers and makes possible the transformation of the past towards the present. The past does say something new as long as it serves the future. Only this way it is overcome, meaning, understood.

If I put it extremely explicit, what the above suggests is the following: If the French cannot now out-paint the masters of the past, they have not seen/understood them => they cannot really value them => they do not deserve them⁴. If this is the case – the French cannot out-paint the old – there would be nothing more purifying for their honor than a fire (because they would not have anything to allow them to live in dishonesty any longer). But even if this is not the case – the French can out-paint the old – there is nothing left to be learned, and nothing would stimulate regeneration more than fire. Some may even try to console the French by saying that as long as the memory for the paintings and their masters is alive, so are they.

For better or for worse, though, with paintings it is not like with gods – if a painting is destroyed or disappears, no talking or memory can bring it back to life. No word can speak for it like the painting would speak about its creator⁵ because the painting IS the word itself between a creator and a spectator. If we go further with the analogy between an artwork and a word (or better a text) then being able to create artworks would equate with being able to talk and write; being capable of seeing would equate with listening and reading. This concept is popular now under the name “visual semiotics” and relies on the fact that visual stimuli provoke non-verbal perception of information. Then besides technical and technological mastery, engaging with visual art would require and develop non-verbal intelligence, nonverbal literacy that CANNOT be delivered through verbal elaborations and explications but only through making and “taking” artworks. Surely we can talk and discuss a certain artwork, but our words do not add further content and meaning to the impression already given by the image, words can only try to translate the visual picture to a verbal concept, and this way change it – make it or break it but never completely replace and represent. If I stick to Nietzsche’s explanation of the birth of truth and lie in a verbal language as a mean of establishing life-preserving peace, it would be more correctly to use “pre-verbal” than “nonverbal” in describing communication through creating and perceiving visual stimuli because image making and memorizing is the first phase before giving this image a concrete name.⁶ But not naming, speaking out loud a judgment about something, is giving ontological insights⁷: “... art - and not morality - is the truly metaphysical activity of man.” (Nietzsche, 1886:8)

⁴ And finally, they cannot miss them, at least not as something different from a trophy, won by their ancestors. Meanwhile, they are illegally trading with it as if they indeed owned it and they really do not want it to be confiscated from them. Moreover, they cannot learn from it when it is put out of life in a museum, Dewey would add. (Dewey, 1934:8-9)

⁵ ... or creators in the plural, manifesting their mutual genealogical branch in a single work. My favorite example is a cartoon movie.

⁶ “... a nerve stimulus is transferred into an image: first metaphor. The image, in turn, is imitated in a sound: second metaphor.” (Nietzsche, 1873: location 4790) *and “The conceptual edifice is an imitation of temporal, spatial, and numerical relationships in the domain of metaphor.” (location 4902) *but “by shattering and mocking the old conceptual barriers, he may at least correspond creatively to the impression of the powerful present intuition.” (location 4946) – This appears to be the “essence” of art-making according to Nietzsche, while, nowadays, it is popular to talk about art-making as a way of self-expression, self-esteem therapy, and exploration of “fundamental truths” (Hickman, 2010: location 2998)

So how this “metaphysical activity of man” is to be performed, understood and taught when words distort it? These, I think, are the big everlasting philosophical questions of art. I am not capable of giving exhaustive answers to them. I will only trace the development of two hypotheses: 1) true and absolute understanding of an artwork is possible 2) true and absolute understanding of an artwork is impossible.⁸ To start with the first - it is a continuation of the two “terrifying consequences” from the example at the beginning. So, we have someone who has already gained “the true and absolute understanding of an artwork” and is bored with it. At the same time this someone is sentimentally attached to the subject (as a great part of his life has been dedicated to attaining The Understanding – it is the precious trophy) and his historical knowledge, hypothetically immaculately exact, is now sterile – nothing left to know, only a killer-weight mass of information; what is this “understanding” person to do with it? Why is it important to him to pass it on to the next generation: to prove his self-worth, to engage in a transfer just for the sake of not being alone, to serve a higher cause or to exploit it? After all, they must do something with it because its weight is suffocating: hyper-historicism is occluding life (Nietzsche, 1884:4). Let us agree that sharing understanding and using the same understanding for exploitation is inconsistent and that pride and ego can be present regardless of the possibility for complete understanding. Even then two existential questions remain - duty and loneliness.

The presence of something absolute (as the understanding of an artwork) always requires contrast - noble and ignoble, for example. Therefore, I can imagine that the noble one would take the form of a teacher, who despite his complete cognitive indifference towards the same-old-seen, sacrifices time and effort to “enlighten” as if with a torch from each corner the artwork in question until the point we lose every sense of volume.⁹ We get relieved to the same state of the teacher’s apathy, and we are now ready to move our eyes to something new in disguise to unveil. However, it is not the responsibility or duty that makes a teacher out of a man but the will to power, I can now hear Nietzsche saying. So if we do not take this literally, we can see what form of self-assertion teaching takes even when it is parallel to compassion for the sufferings of the ones in search of understanding. It is the seeking of social interaction and engagement through art, as the best way to consolidate power. However, this accumulation of power aims no material interest but a more subtle one – the need for closeness with

⁷ “... my conviction *is+ that art is the highest task and the true metaphysical activity of this life.” (Nietzsche, 1871:14)

⁸ Nietzsche himself would not put the questions in this way because for him there is no, and there could not be, anything “true and absolute.”

⁹ As the sensation of the volume is created by the game between darkness and light, a purely light body – a shining one – leaves us with no data about its 3-dimensional characteristics (for example: staring at the Sun, or at full moon). We are susceptible to perceiving material measures because of the darkness in things. Imagine if everything was shining brightly around us – we would go blind and uninformed about what is beneath. The same is true if everything was completely black.

another human being, communication through a pre-verbal language, not out of the needs of the first steps of Maslow's pyramid but of a higher one – friendship as opposed to loneliness.¹⁰ Some may ask what the relationship between the need for friends and the need for aesthetic experience is. To me, there is no difference because I see every social interaction as an expression of taste¹¹. Here is the place to say why I consider loneliness and not joy to be the core reason for creating; or teaching others how to create. My perception is derived from my own practice, and for this reason, I do not pretend for a universal hold of my claim. To avoid misunderstanding, I will start with that I am convinced that joy is intrinsic to the process of creating, but it comes later on. The creative process to me starts with pain and ends (but not always) in ecstasy and euphoria that makes it hard for me to hold a pencil, let alone draw. Joy is in the middle - after an admired object for imitation and interpretation is found and set as a drawing task (here comes the therapeutic “function” of art).

The process of drawing per se is a “transcending” experience occurring as if out of space and time, which is a personal “meditative” practice with no intentions of sharing with others my “heavenly peace.” When the work is done and if I am pleased with the result – I start dancing around the room, singing and pretending I had company. It is the time of the euphoria when I start feeling a need to share my creation and start looking at it as a reflection of myself – a piece of me in an S.O.S. “bottle.”

More eloquently in “Art as Experience” John Dewey defends the idea that experiencing art and the aesthetic occurs most naturally when it serves the community or the concrete individual, immediately without the (Dewey, 1934:8-9) “holier-than-thou attitude” of “art for art’s sake.” Art has the purpose of a great communicator horizontally - among its creators/ among its spectators or vertically - when a “monologue” is passed through space and time from a (dead and gone, maybe anonymous) master to a weak, small, hopeless loner, as indeed every aesthetically thirsty person appears to be. Not because he is such in the eyes of his contemporaries but because he compares himself with imaginary idols acting heroically in a tale of monumental history¹². Also, what can be more monumental than art¹³, what can supply us better with a hero than the titanic evidence for sacrifice and genius, characteristic of the greatest craftsmen and artists in history. We then automatically become curious what is it behind “the

¹⁰ I am far from the thought that a friendship build on aesthetic compatibility is a need as strong as hunger and thirst, but the one that is no longer neither hungry nor thirsty may sometimes prefer dying than living without sharing his music taste with another being. This example is romanticized to an extreme but is a possible scenario. Especially if we are to agree with Nietzsche that “Life is worth living, says art, the beautiful temptress; life is worth knowing, says science.” (1869:location 109)

¹¹ Here I have boiled Nietzsche’s strong concept of constant re-evaluation of values down to the much softer and smaller frame of the aesthetics, substituting the personal and perspective judgment in moral context with taste.

¹² I am using “monumental history” refereeing to Nietzsche in “The Use and Abuse of History for Life” from 1874

¹³ ... and more “antiquarian” than science, in the Nietzschean sense? What is left then to be “critical” – philosophy, law, politics?

wisdom of suffering which is the correlative of artistic talent” (Nietzsche, 1871:25)? Is it the will to power or weakness such as the desire for belonging to a group? Or, it is due to both of them inseparably? Can it be that the spectator searches out of loneliness and the creator creates out of loneliness, writing his message in a bottle, sending out an S.O.S.¹⁴, hoping (subconsciously) for someone to save him from the sense of solipsism if not today – tomorrow, or in a hundred or thousand years? If the two sides ever meet and exact understanding is possible – great: “two hearts believing in just one mind,” Phil Collins sings. But what if exact truthful understanding does not exist, or more correctly, we are not capable of it?

If there is no such thing as complete understanding, the good news is - no terrifying consequences: 1) No boredom, as the same-old-seen is always different to us. The research of its genealogy is a never-ending road backward because an artwork is not a primer but a living thing – some sort of a diary of a person; 2) There is no division between competent and incompetent - only givers and takers of art that can change roles. This pluralism of evaluations is only possible if we give up every base of criteria and agree that an artwork is a word in a non-verbal language, where we can never get to the primary source of reference thoroughly. Despite the limitations of the media (oil on canvas, for example), we can never perceive in its entirety something limited (like a painting) just because it speaks further beyond the describable and described in technical terms. If we give up tracing mystical enchantment and metaphysical essences (and I am inclined to think that this is precisely what Nietzsche would advise us to do), the only thing that is left for the teacher in fine arts to do is not constructing criteria, estimating and indicating according to them, but facilitating the performance part - learning by doing. The teacher is no longer trying to push children in a pre-set frame but serving as a know-how instrument to the children’s authentic interest. If there is no such self-generated enthusiasm, then, maybe the child is not enjoying drawing. After all, not everyone finds fulfillment in self-expression through images. Some may choose sounds or words, or body language or a combination of them. In any case, the price of this pluralism of understandings is solipsism: “All that we actually know (about these laws of nature) is what we ourselves bring to them. [...] Thus it is we who impress ourselves.”(Nietzsche, 1873: location 4899)

To elaborate on the above: In this essay, I talk of artworks as we had a scale to measure what an artwork is and what it is not, I talk of out-painting as if I knew how to define it – I do not - it is just what verbal language makes me do. I definitely do not agree that there is something like a “certificate” we can award to a work to label it art, or to people to label them experts. All I am struggling to do here is to re-

¹⁴ But being capable of writing a message, putting it in a reliable “bottle” and having hope for help = sharing is already a manifestation of might and not of desperation. Here again, I feel power and weakness operating inseparably. Desperation, I conceive, can never give birth to an artwork (and an artwork can never speak of the artist’s desperation. Stagnation speaks of desperation). If I am required to define desperation, I would say it is: wasting others’ time wanting them to console your fears instead of learning how to face and fight them through creating something out of what you have here, now and on your own. “The others” will then come alone but “nobody knows you when you are falling.”

Richard Marx sings. To use this verse – making art is flying.

read a great mind who claimed that definitions, whatsoever, cannot be given to stand still forever and ever. Also, to show that art (especially non-verbal forms of art: abstract visual art and purely instrumental music, for example) is a language but a non-verbal one which is worth learning for our own sake of being together with others emotionally in an unparalleled way. This way of communicating “gives satisfactory results” only if it is used immediately: works are being made, exhibited and perceived with no hype and not under special conditions but in real life as every museum is a zoo for living artworks where they lead a longer but unnatural and maybe unhappy life. If the reasons for creating a piece are purely mechanical, it can only be a product but never art because the purpose of fine art is to connect through emotionally and intellectually charged content. (Dewey, 1934) Empty products¹⁵ may support a comfortable silence but never shaking and life-changing news.

What may this news be? - If science¹⁶ stimulates comprehension of the physical world in and around us, art helps us comprehend one another¹⁷ like social and humanitarian sciences cannot do (because they use words¹⁸ instead of artworks to convey information to the human). The creator, on the other hand, may try to lie about himself verbalizing his creation, but the creation itself cannot lie, and it is a lot more trustworthy source of information, albeit not an explicit one. (Win some - lose some.) When every concept is a metaphor and deludes with analogies as if there were two things identical on earth: “Every concept arises from the equation of unequal things.”(Nietzsche, 1873: location 4802), clumsiness and poor articulation are no longer crime because there is no such thing as explicit knowledge. Logic then turns out to be an unreliable judge of truth not because it is something unhealthy (it is a good exercise for the brain to say the least) but because it operates through reduction of variables. Of course, logic and mathematics, geometry and ideal bodies, shapes, and forms are grounding foundations for every painter aiming at creating a realistic impression and illusion. This way of thinking and seeing, Nietzsche would typify as Apollonian. All that Dionysus wants from us, on the other hand, is to paint¹⁹ with no thinking as if under a spell. Some painters are quite good at it, and it is not hard actually. The difficult part comes when the Dionysian enthusiasm should be restrained, but kept and in no way killed, by

¹⁵ Ideally “empty” products do not exist, as every realization requires an investment of some amount of intelligence and every intellect is intertwined with emotion. Then even the design of a chair or a sofa speaks of their designer and creator, the environment of them both and so on backward on an untraceable path.

¹⁶ “Science has this in common with art that the most ordinary, everyday things appear to it as something entirely new and attractive, as if metamorphosed by witchcraft and now seen for the first time.” (Nietzsche, 1869: location 108)

¹⁷ ... besides making us generally smarter and more “innovative” through puzzle/problem-solving; this is true for every human activity, not only art-making, that requires some sort of intelligence (for the creation of a text, a building, a meal, and so on.)

¹⁸ In his early work from 1871 “The Birth of Tragedy,” Nietzsche agrees with Arthur Schopenhauer that language and articulation apply principium individuationis and this way divide unnaturally complete structures. However, in Nietzsche’s later philosophy language is no longer a “criminal” but even performs the opposite (unifying) functions.

¹⁹ Painting, according to Nietzsche, could only be an Apollonian deed. Here I prescribe it to Dionysius to refer to the Abstractionists’ current in visual art that matured conceptually after Nietzsche’s death. I could only guess whether he would agree with my redistribution.

Apollo in order to make the work “readable” for the spectator. Even if a purely emotional “reading” is taking place in immediate contact with the abstract work (it is the gut feeling), the work will not be remembered as it cannot be classified and stored. In the same way, we are not gifted to memorize long numeric lines – we need a form to pour the content in: “The Dionysian element was to be found in the music of the chorus, while the Apollonian element was contained in the dialogue, providing a concrete symbolism that balanced the Dionysian revelry. Therefore, the Apollonian spirit was able to give form to the abstract Dionysian.” (Hausmann, 1909: location 2725)

A painting, therefore, can be both Apollonian and Dionysian when the ratio of semblance and illusion to the spontaneity of expression is balanced. The marriage between the Apollonian almost photographic Realism from the Enlightenment with the Dionysian²⁰ Abstractionism could give birth to what Nietzsche would call “true art.” Still, the forms that we might consider as standing in the middle (Impressionism, Expressionism, Cubism, Dadaism, Fauvism, Surrealism, Art Deco, Art Nouveau, and so on) are not “The Right/True Art” from the perspective of today. Even though they were “True Art” back in the days in Nietzschean sense, they are no longer such because they precede forms of Abstractionism that are even more radical in the chronological order of the History of Fine Art. This chronology, seen in the light of Nietzsche’s constant re-seeing of phenomena, is an endless ping-pong between two sides²¹ where every new switch and turn is the latest and rightful²² form of “The True Art.” If we follow Nietzsche, we end up with the irony that we always live in “The True Art” here and now, but we can never recognize it before it is gone and no longer such. We cannot even differentiate clearly who is an artist and who is not before the moment is gone²³. “...every artist is an 'imitator,' and indeed either an Apollonian dream-artist or a Dionysian artist of intoxication or finally - as, for example, in Greek tragedy- an artist of both dream and intoxication at once.” (Nietzsche, 1871:19) I will extrapolate from the above and conclude that (visual) art is somewhere in the tender balance between, or better – born from the union of, (Dionysian) inspiration and (Apollonian) craftsmanship, but always among people, the life of which depends on it serving as a communicator, being a reassuring talker – an orator in a language of no words. No matter whether we are capable of understanding the language of artworks or not, they speak, and this is what attracts us to them.

²⁰ See note 19

²¹ “[Nietzsche] introduces an intellectual dichotomy between the Dionysian and the Apollonian (reality as disordered and undifferentiated by forms versus reality as ordered and differentiated by forms). Nietzsche claims life always involves a struggle between these two elements, each battling for control over the existence of humanity.” (HAUSSMANN 1909: location 2718)

²² “Rightful” because it has won the battle for existence – life

²³ Still, we must make distinctions at every present moment, may they be wrong because: “It requires great strength to be able to live and forget how far life and injustice are one.” (Nietzsche, 1884:3)

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