Art and “the real world”

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*A conference paper examining the relationship between art and what is loosely termed the “real world”.*

Although it’s a little unorthodox, I’d like to adopt a slightly autobiographical approach to my topic and say a little about the problems I’ve experienced myself in thinking about the relationship between art and the “real world”. Not because I think my experience is unique or even unusual. On the contrary, I suspect that the problems that troubled me have troubled many others, which is why I think there might be value in sharing my experience. Let me explain what I mean.

When I was younger, and contemplating the possibility of undertaking university studies in literature, I was often assailed by thoughts of the following kind: What exactly is the use of literature, and, indeed, of art in all its forms? What is their connection with real world in which we live? If I studied science or political systems, for example, I wouldn’t feel the need to ask that question. Science obviously deals with the real world and so does the study of politics. But what bearing do novels, plays, and poetry, have on the hard facts of life – on the real world we live in? They’re basically inventions – fictions – aren’t they? Of course, I might *enjoy*studying literature, but wouldn’t I be wasting my time on something of marginal importance? A scientist might discover new ways of helping mankind – new wonder drugs, for example; and someone working in the political sphere can do a lot to improve social arrangements. But what do the arts achieve? What is their connection with the real world?

The question genuinely worried me and I spent a lot of time looking for a satisfactory answer. In doing so, one of the sources I turned to, naturally enough, was the philosophy of art – or aesthetics, to give it its alternative name – which, I reasoned, must surely have examined the problem I was facing. But I confess I was rather disappointed. I’ll have a little more to say about this matter later on but a general comment I’d make here is that modern aesthetics, especially in Anglo-American environments, is still very much in thrall to eighteenth century thinkers such as Hume and Kant, whom it regards as its founding fathers, so to speak. As a result, the mindset of modern aesthetics is often oriented towards ideas that preoccupied the eighteenth century – such as the notions of beauty, taste, and aesthetic pleasure – instead of the problem that so worried me, about which the eighteenth century had much less to say. There are exceptions, of course: some modern philosophers of art do venture onto the terrain I’m discussing. But generally speaking, it seemed to me then – and still seems to me – that the problem that worried me is not approached with the seriousness and resolve it requires. As a young student, I must say I found this disappointing.

So, in the circumstances, I was thrown back largely on my own resources; but fortunately, after some time, the fogs began to lift a little. The first glimmer of light came, oddly enough, when I stopped thinking about art and literature themselves for a while and began to ask myself about the other fields of intellectual endeavour I’ve mentioned – science and politics. I should explain that at this period of my life I very much wanted all art, and literature above all, to be essentially about politics. That is, I would have been delighted if I could have proved to myself that all great novels (for example) were essentially political in nature, whether or not their subject matter concerned political issues; because, if all art was essentially political – and there were writers such as Sartre who insisted it was – then the link between art and the real world was self-evident. Case closed. My worries would be at an end.

But one day I found myself asking what political studies, and related areas such as history and sociology, really are – what their essential subject matter is. That’s obviously a very large question, but it struck me that one claim that could be made with confidence was that disciplines of this kind are about interactions *between* people – about men and women in collective contexts acting on, and reacting to, one another. So, while in a very loose sense, it was correct to say that both literature and history (choosing these as examples) are both concerned with something one might call “the real world we live in” or “the world around us”, and so on, history’s focus is a *collective* world – a world of actions and consequences. Like kindred areas such as political studies or sociology, history has no interest in an individual’s thoughts, feelings or actions in themselves but only as they figure within a collective arena that we presume to exist “among” men and women when they act upon one another. In other words – and this was the heart of the matter – studies of social experience rest on an intellectual ambition that one cannot even begin to realize without the initial resolve to transcend the individual and his or her “private” world of joys and sorrows. To state the matter in a paradoxical but nevertheless quite precise form, studies of collective experience concern everyone, and *for that very reason*, concern no one. That is not of course to suggest that the events history and politics describe affect no one. That would be an absurd claim. The point is simply that the categories of social explanation – the concepts that claim to impose meaning and intelligibility on the otherwise chaotic multiplicity of a collective event – are, by their very nature, designed to illuminate something fundamentally different from the world as perceived and understood by the single individual. This insight, I soon realized, is wonderfully illustrated by the famous scene in Stendhal’s *La Chartreuse de Parme*, which many of you may know, where the novel’s hero, the young Fabrizio, wanders the field of Waterloo, with the battle raging all around him, in search of a prodigious historical event – which he is never able to find. There is an apparently unbridgeable gulf – an “irretrievable disproportion” as one writer I admire calls it1– between the forms of thought that confer meaning on a collective event and the categories that shape the world of individual experience.

This was only a first step, but for me it was a crucial one. Of course, I had to abandon my fond Sartrean dreams that all art is essentially political in nature. But the gain far outweighed the loss. The “real world” of literature, and all art I now realized, has its own specific and irreplaceable nature, and differs radically from the world of social thought. It’s certainly true that, under certain circumstances and in certain forms, politics and history can find a place in the world of art – as history does in a semi-ironical way in *La Chartreuse de Parme*, for example. But there is, nonetheless, an in-principle distinction at stake. There is a real world of art and a real world of social thought and there is nothing to be gained and everything to lose by confusing the two and smudging over the difference.

By this time I was beginning to see that the problem that worried me so much was really due to a trap I had fallen into – my vagueness and confusion about the notion of “the real world”. Moreover, having gone this far, I realised that I could go even further and examine that other apparent royal road to the real world – science. Here, at first glance, the challenge facing me seemed even greater. So powerful and so ubiquitous is the influence of science in our lives today that we tend to become mesmerised by it, so to speak. Scientific knowledge, we find ourselves thinking, is the measure of all things. If one can speak sensibly about a “real world”, then it is science, we tend to think, that must hold the key to it. Science, with its handmaiden technology, will unlock all the mysteries.

Now I have no more wish to attack the credentials of science than I had, a moment ago, to impugn the value of historical and political thought. But in the light of the reflections I’ve just described, I nevertheless found myself asking if the “real world” of science is distinguishable from “the real world” of art in the same kind of radical way that the latter is distinguishable from the world of history and social thought. And I soon saw that it was – and this is why:

Debates about the relative merits of science and the arts are often framed in terms of the notions of “subjectivity” and “objectivity”. Science, it is said, provides an account of reality based on objective evidence – evidence whose validity is verifiable through public processes of experimentation and demonstration. But the real world of art – of literary works, for example – is a different matter. At their best, it is said, works of literature give us an author’s sincere view of the world; but ultimately, this is simply the world as he or she perceives it: it is his or hers specifically; it is merely “subjective”.

The argument is a familiar one and I’m sure you’ve heard it many times before. Yet familiar though it is, it has a rather irritating persuasiveness. We’d like very much to dismiss it as facile and superficial but where exactly is the flaw? Where does it go wrong?

It goes wrong, I believe, because it sets another little trap for us – a trap hinging on the ambiguity of those greatly over-used terms “subjective” and “objective”. Let me explain.

Why is it, exactly, that we tend to associate science with the term “objectivity”? We do so, I believe, because we’re thinking of the methodology of science to which I have referred – its well-known procedures of experimentation, public accountability, and so on. But is “objectivity” in fact the most accurate label for this? The key feature of this methodology that’s even more obvious – so obvious that we tend to take it for granted and overlook it – is the importance placed on the *impersonal* nature of the processes employed and of the knowledge acquired – that is, the importance of being able to reach the same conclusion irrespective of who is asking the question. Francis Bacon, that well-known Renaissance advocate of the scientific method, wrote that one of the “illusions which block men’s minds” is that brought about by “the individual nature of each man’s mind and body; and also in his education, way of life and chance events”; and a modern scientist would surely be happy to agree with that claim. Viewed from the standpoint of science, the individual, with what science regards as his or her “merely personal” perceptions, is a potential source of distortion – of “illusions” in Bacon’s words – rather than of reliable knowledge. The ideal perspective for science is quite deliberately no-one’s perspective: it is, so to speak, a “public” perspective – a “view from nowhere” as one modern philosopher puts it2 – and the real world it pursues is, as a matter of principle, an entirely impersonal world – a world free of “interference” by what Bacon terms “the individual nature of each man’s mind and body”.

You can perhaps see where my argument is going. Like history and social thought, if for a different reason, science also seeks to free itself from anything dependent on the “private world” of the single individual; and, like history and social thought, it does so as a matter of principle. The trap set for us by the terms “objective” and “subjective” is not that they are entirely irrelevant, but that they can so easily mislead us. While capturing the notion of impersonality to a degree, the term “objective” can also suggest the idea of “correspondence with the facts”, or “what the world is really like”. “Subjective”, likewise, can easily suggest not just that which owes its origin and nature to individual experience, but that which may be biased and therefore unreliable. Once we clear those distracting ambiguities away, we see that science and artistic endeavour are intellectual enterprises of fundamentally different kinds. The world of art – literature for example – is the world of the single individual’s perceptions and understandings – his or her hopes, fears, joys, and sorrows. This is its essence – its sine qua non. But this essence is anathema to science, which can only realize its ambitions if it systematically excludes everything of that kind. Once again, in other words, there is an “irretrievable disproportion”. The “real world” of science is separated from the world of art as radically as the latter is from the “real world” of history and political thought. All three can, in a very loose sense, claim to be describing “the real world” or “what the world is really like” – and this loose sense has, I believe, generated endless confusion in the philosophy of art – but the worlds each of them describe are of fundamentally different kinds.

I’d like to conclude with two brief points.

First, let me stress again that, as I’ve sought to show, the differences between art and literature on the one hand, and science and history on the other, are fundamental differences – differences in nature. Contemporary philosophers of art often obscure this point by speaking in a very general way about “the world around us” or “the actual world”, or “reality”, “human experience”, “real life” and so on and then arguing that art, history and science simply offer different “perspectives” on the phenomenon so labelled. (This, it seems to me, is essentially what Nelson Goodman is doing in *Ways of Worldmaking*.3) Thinking of this kind, I believe, simply leads us into the traps I’ve described and breeds confusion. The point is crucial and it is also, in my view, central to any sound rationale of the humanities as a field of study. The humanities – the arts in particular – are not simply, as one modern textbook on the topic argues, a source of “subjective knowledge” about a world that science describes in “objective” terms.4 Thinking of that kind simply leads to perplexity and obfuscation if one is attempting to explain the specific nature and value of the arts.

My final point is this: The argument I’ve presented marks out the area in which art operates: it has drawn the boundaries, so to speak. But I have not attempted to take the next step of describing what literature and the other arts *do* within those boundaries – what their function is. Given that their field of operation is the domain of human experience in the sense I’ve described, what then is their specific achievement within this domain? Does art “represent” this experience, as many argue? Does it use it as a means of evoking what philosophers of art, harking back to the eighteenth century, call “aesthetic experience”? I’ve made no attempt to address that question today because time does not permit. But I have written extensively on the subject and here I will simply say this: I think the widespread notion that art exists simply to represent the world is not only unacceptable but seriously understates the value and significance of art. And I also think that the idea that art is simply a source of so-called “aesthetic pleasure” is a notion that has long outlived its usefulness, if it ever had any. My own views on this question have been strongly influenced by the twentieth century French theorist, André Malraux, who argues, putting his position very briefly, that art exists to create a rival world – in effect a “humanised” world in place of the primal chaos of individual experience – a thesis I should quickly add that has nothing at all to do with Nelson Goodman’s notion of “worldmaking”, which in any case, as I’ve suggested, I find very questionable.

But I will leave those matters there because my time has run out. I have raised them simply to make the point that my demarcation of the world of art is only a first step – an essential step, I believe, but one that needs to be followed by an equally careful description of the function of art. I will just add this thought: I believe, as I said, that the worries I experienced as a young student are by no means unusual. Many others, I suspect, have felt the same way, and for good reason because the problem I faced is one that’s almost bound to occur to anyone who reflects seriously on the role of the arts in human life, whether they undertake university study or not. Let me say again that it has been no part of my purpose today to attack, or devalue, science or social thought. Both play important and legitimate roles in our lives. But it is essential, I believe, to recognise that neither of these areas of intellectual endeavour is concerned essentially and specifically with individual human experience – with the nature of our hopes, fears, joys, and sorrows in themselves. In an important sense, this individual world is our *only* real world: it is not, after all, an impersonal realm like science or the collective world of history; it is the heart and soul of each of our lives. Today, when the function of art is so often trivialised, when art in all its forms, is often portrayed as little more than an occasional embellishment of life – and when philosophers of art, wittingly or not, encourage such thinking by persisting with the worn-out eighteenth century notion that art exists simply for “aesthetic” delectation – in those circumstances, it seems to me, there’s a real danger that this crucial human function of art will be obscured and that the heart and soul of our lives will be diminished accordingly.

*Notes:*

[1] Nicola Chiaromonte, "Malraux and the Demons of Action," in *Malraux, A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood, Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1964), 96-116.

[2] Thomas Nagel. The phrase is however a little misleading. A “view from nowhere” can only be an *ideal* – a guiding principle. Strictly speaking, it would be an impossibility.

[3] Cf: “Fiction operates in actual worlds in much the same way as non-fiction. Cervantes and Bosch and Goya, no less than Boswell and Newton and Darwin, take and unmake and remake and retake familiar worlds, recasting them in remarkable and sometimes recondite but eventually recognizable – that is re-cognizable – ways.” Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Hassocks, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1978), 104,105. Beneath the rather distracting verbal flourishes, there is a clear implication that the “familiar worlds” in question are fundamentally of *the same kind* whether they are worlds of art, biography, or science. This assumption runs right through Goodman’s book. He is far more interested in attempting to prove that the worlds of science and art (for example) c*onverge* in some way than in highlighting any in-principle differences that might exist between them. Hence a statement such as the following: “Even if the ultimate product of science, unlike that of art, is a literal, verbal or mathematical, denotational theory, *science and art proceed in much the same way* with their searching and building”. Ibid., 107. (Emphasis in final sentence added.)

[4] Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, *Truth, Fiction, and Literature: A Philosophical Perspective* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 368-378.