Postgraduate Journal of Aesthetics, Vol. 1, No. 3, December 2004

ART HISTORICAL EXPLANATION OF PAINTINGS AND THE NEED FOR AN AESTHETICS OF AGENCY [1]

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Why should a person, and in the context of this conference particularly an art historian, take seriously the notion of the aesthetic, its discovery and/or rediscovery? Aesthetics might after all be considered at best something of a distraction from bread and butter historical and sociological analysis, and at worst entirely incompatible with it. Pursuing the line further it might be urged that, since on the one hand aesthetics is about 'how things appear'—i.e. is subject to individual predilection, taste and feeling—and on the other, historical analysis is about the careful and scholarly reconstruction of a past social reality, the two must be at loggerheads. What the art historian writes about on a weekday whilst wearing her hard hat at the office must not be confused with what she personally feels, wandering around a gallery in her woolly hat at the weekend.

Even in some recent writing where aesthetics has been accepted as a viable mode of thinking within art history it has largely been understood as a rival theory to explanations such as economic, social, and historical, and not something that is fundamental to the practice of art. David Carrier has recently argued that the historical and the aesthetic are essentially *opposed* approaches to art works and that it is simply the unhappy fate of the art historian continually to be torn between them. [2] No argument, he says, can tell us how to choose between these adversaries. But are there reasons to be less pessimistic about our current situation? Could it be that whilst no argument can help us to choose *between* the aesthetic and historical there

[1] I'd like to thank my supervisor Andrew Harrison for his continual kind help and advice over recent years, many of the thoughts I hope he will recognise as being inspired by his own work, however he is of course not to blame for anything I say.

[2] Carrier (1996), 140.

might be an argument to show that they are not really competing theories at all, but rather, different forms of understanding that need instead to be integrated?

This paper is designed to show firstly that there is no reason to think of aesthetics as a particularly soft or woolly form of understanding and secondly no reason to hold that it is necessarily in conflict with mainstream historical inquiry. I start by taking a painting of *Diana and Actaeon* by Gainsborough along with its' supporting sketches,[3] and outline a specific problem in their interpretation. I set about tackling the problem by arguing that there is a missing line of questioning in standard accounts of painting, questions about *how* a particular work was made, and argue that what is needed is an 'aesthetics of agency'.[4] I show why these are not merely questions about how things 'look' or the 'manner' of appearance, or even simply questions about the 'signature' characteristics associated with the artist, but rather questions about the manifestation of mind *in* practice, and give a brief analysis of one way in which mind can be said to articulate itself in painting. I then return to the works by Gainsborough, demonstrating how the foregoing considerations about aesthetic agency resolve the problems in their interpretation. I conclude that questions of aesthetics are not merely interesting diversions, but are inevitable and necessary lines of inquiry, that are not only consistent with, but actually *complement* the prevailing socio-historical mode of art historical explanation.

GAINSBOROUGH AND THE NEGLECT OF AESTHETIC AGENCY

There are a number of paintings that pose a specific kind of problem for art historical explanation. I am going to concentrate on a group of works by Gainsborough on the theme of *Diana and Actaeon*. The works are representative of this problem in that they appear to be both highly personal and idiosyncratic, and yet make quite far-reaching demands on the cognitive, perceptual and imaginative life of the spectator. Placing the works within the rest of Gainsborough's oeuvre they appear quite out of place, both formally and in terms of the chosen subject matter. These are the only mythological works Gainsborough ever attempted

[3] Thomas Gainsborough, *Diana and Actaeon* (c. 1784-6); *First Study for Diana and Actaeon* (c. 1784-6; reprinted in Hayes (1983), no 939); *Second Study for Diana and Actaeon* (c. 1784-6; reprinted in Hayes (1970), no 811); *Third Study for Diana and Actaeon* (c. 1784-6; reprinted in Hayes (1970), no. 812).

[4] For an interesting analysis of this notion with respect to Hume's philosophy, see Schier (1986-7), 121-135.

and the painting is only one of two known large-scale nudes.[5] These two strands then, the highly personal and idiosyncratic nature of the work and yet also the feeling that their value somehow transcends local circumstance, make the pictures very difficult to deal with given standard patterns of explanation. On 'old fashioned' formal accounts, the works seem awkward, even incompetent, but equally neither does sociological explanation quite provide the spectator with sufficient conceptual and perceptual tools to make these peculiar pieces intelligible. There are numerous instances of this phenomenon and towards the end of the paper I refer briefly to other sketches (and their status as sketches may turn out to be relevant) by Cézanne, which prove equally problematic. First, however, I deal with Gainsborough.

A great deal can be learnt about the history and sociological background from which *Diana and Actaeon* emerged which helps to place the group in an appropriate setting. Michael Rosenthal has set the work against the background of a much broader contemporary debate about the status of various styles, methods and genres in painting, spear-headed by Gainsborough on the one hand and Reynolds on the other.[6] Rosenthal convincingly argues that *Diana and Actaeon* was a bid on Gainsborough's part to show the Royal Academy and Reynolds, its President, that he could paint in the 'Grand' or 'Heroic' manner if he chose, and could even add something significant from his own style.

The main stumbling block for the picture and its studies, however, is that even given this kind of detailed reconstruction of reasons for action, *the means* by which Gainsborough hopes to achieve his various aims, the material choices he makes *in painting the picture*, are made no more intelligible.[7] Simply by having a demonstrable goal the works are no better understood: they can still appear confusing, awkward and incompetent.

Given that the subject matter was unfamiliar to Gainsborough, could it be then, that the works are simply an extra-stylistic glitch at the end of Gainsborough's otherwise successful

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[5] The other being the so-called *Musidora* of c.1780-8 (oil on canvas support: 1880 x 1530 mm Tate Britain N00308). The central figure is comparable with the nymph to the left of centre foreground, in Diana and Actaeon.

[6] Rosenthal (1992).

[7] For the reconstruction of action in terms of giving reasons for action see Davidson (1963). Since the argument concentrates on explanation in terms of giving reasons *for* action it thereby neglects important ways in which reason finds expression *in* action. For example, the way that features arising in the circumstances of action can modify and change the agent's goals, and, the way that agents often set off with the foggiest of ideas concerning their goals, goals that only become clear in the process of action. See A. Harrison, (1978), A. Baier, (1985).

career? Yet even if this is partially right, it does not help the spectator understand these late works as a part of Gainsborough's overall practice, nor does it make the most of what this group has to offer a more sympathetic reconstruction. As suitors for understanding,[8] spectators want the works not just to be put in a context or be rationalised by establishing the ends of action, rather the *content and mode* of action itself needs to be made *intelligible*. What should be done?

My solution to the problem starts from the basic recognition that paintings are artefacts, which I define in this context as an object that is, among other things, the outcome of someone's intentional activity. If the notion of analyticity can be taken momentarily as unproblematic, it is in a sense 'analytically true' of paintings that they are made; they are the direct outcome of someone's—normally the painter's—activity. I argue that spectators are therefore committed to a *minimal line of questioning* concerning 'the aesthetics of agency', which is to say they should insist on asking *how* a given work was made. Consider Pointon's introductory handbook for art historians, which presents list of questions taken as an interlocking set that she claims are to be asked of artworks.[9] Among them are familiar questions like, 'Who made it?', 'Where is it?', 'For whom was it made?', 'Who acquired it and why?' A list of questions like this can not be expected to cover every possible line of inquiry but, from the point of view of this paper, not only is there an essential question missing but there is a conceptual gap, a whole line of inquiry and thinking omitted that revolves around the question of *how* a work is made.

But why should *how* someone performs an action be even relevant let alone essential for understanding? If someone saves your life, whether they do so awkwardly or with a graceful gesture is surely irrelevant to an overall appreciation of what they have done. A stranded person would have every right to be pretty miffed if his friends insisted on devising a charming

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[8] This phrase is how Meredith translates Kant (1961), section 19, 102. I think it's worth me quoting it as a whole. 'The subjective necessity attributed to a judgment of taste is conditioned. The judgment of taste exacts agreement from everyone; and a person who describes something as beautiful insists that every one ought to give the object in question his approval and follow suit in describing it as beautiful. The ought in aesthetic judgement, therefore, despite an accordance with all the requisite data for passing judgments, is still only pronounced conditionally. We are suitors for agreement from everyone else because we are fortified with a ground common to all. Further, we would be able to count on this agreement, provided we were always assured of the correct subsumption of the case under that ground as the rule of approval'.

[9] 'Interrogating the work of Art', from Pointon (1980), 61.

or witty way to save him; 'Stop messing about and help' he would rightly scream!

This, however, assumes a certain kind of reading of 'aesthetic'. It assumes that aesthetics is, rather superficially, about the 'appearance' or the 'manner' of action. So an 'aesthetics of agency' on this view would be concerned with how someone looks when they act. An aesthetics that asks how an action is performed and answers in terms of how it looks or appears is not only independent but therefore can often conflict with the 'content' of the action. Thus it is sometimes said that a person can perform a morally good deed that 'looks ugly' and bad deeds that 'look beautiful'. Equally for cultural objects, function is sometimes isolated from aesthetic understanding. People say things like, the bridge fell down but 'merely aesthetically' it was quite beautiful (!).

These considerations, however, build an entirely shallow foundation for notions of the beautiful and aesthetic agency. Alternatively, the question of 'how' someone acts can be taken more broadly to include not simply the 'manner' or appearance of action, nor just 'mental states' and 'attitudes' or 'experiences'[10] which seem to hover mysteriously behind the action, but a whole range of *practical thought processes* as embodied in the action. Concepts such as the articulation of intention, the *realisation* of motivations and desires, and the manifestation of thought *in* action show how, and locate where, mind invests action.[11] Here 'the aesthetics of agency' investigates an action as an intelligent and intelligible practical solution to a specific problem situation. It is a question about the manifestation of mind and thus turns out not only to be mildly diverting but actually an inevitable and necessary question to ask when trying to understand the action of making art.

MANIFEST PICTORIAL THOUGHT CONTENT

So how then can 'mind' be said to make itself articulate in painting? The question could be taken, on a kind of 'bucket' theory of mind,[12] to mean how do paintings reflect what happens

[10] For Wollheim (1987) the beholder grasps the meaning of a painting when she shares the same *experience* as that which led the artist to mark the surface as they did. This emphasis on mental experience and 'internal meaning', whatever that is taken to be, has led to the criticism that Wollheim's arguments leave him indifferent to the painted surface. See Michael Podro (1987), 17-18.

[11] See Stuart Hampshire (1983). Further, on the distinction between thought *about* action and thought *in* action see A. Harrison (1978), chapter two, and on the concept of realising see Annette C. Baier (1985).

[12] By which I mean a theory that thinks of the mind as essentially a *passive* register or collection of

at a general level 'around it'; how, for example, does it reflect existing social attitudes, and current trends in 'ideas' and prevailing ideologies. Alternatively, the question could be taken as asking, 'How does the mind of the maker, as exhibited in painting, *itself* constitute a social practice and a mode of thought (rather than simply shadowing existing ones)?' How can a painting gain a distinctive kind of thought content and meaning that is 'its own' and yet is also shareable? [13]

I start by remembering again that a painting is an artefact, which is to say that the object before us is the outcome of someone's activity. From this basic recognition my contention is that the action of making a painting contributes to *the life of the mind*. Fundamentally, there is an intentional relation set up between the maker, the object of her attention (or the 'subject matter' of the painting), and the materials of painting in which the subject is rendered. Since the painter's attention is directed towards selected aspects of a specific subject matter and is shaped within the materials of the paint, the activity of painting itself becomes a mode of thinking for the artist. The artist quite literally thinks *with* materials, turning them into a medium, that is, a medium for thought about the world.

The classic argument that Frege makes concerning what I have called *meaning* and *content*, or what in his terminology is *sense* and *reference*, is that the sense of a linguistic term cannot be identical with its referent since two different terms can share the same referent. The terms 'the morning star' and 'the evening star' refer to the same object but have a different sense (or, in my terminology, the *meaning* of the term or *how* it is put to use differs).[14] Extrapolating from this distinction it can be said analogously that pictorial meaning is generated not only by what is represented, some independent state of affairs, rather it is generated by what is represented *as it emerges in the life of the paint*.[15]

This last phrase concerning 'emergence' makes it obvious why the endlessly tempting separation of 'internal' from 'external' properties is a mistake. The abstract division between

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impressions.

[13] For the concept of 'pictorial thought' especially in contrast to views that emphasise 'inner experience' I looked at A. Harrison (2001).

[14] Frege (1980).

[15] I recognise this is, loosely, a way of talking associated with later Wittgenstein and the use I make of Frege's distinction certainly stretches his own project, since for Frege, in his inquiry into the logic of referring rather than actual intentional processes, meaning is identified with the object. For mapping the actual process of pictorial agency however, it becomes necessary to understand how meaning is something that emerges where mind *meets* world.

them becomes obsolete when faced with the fluidity of the painter's activity. For example, whilst the 'internal' properties belong on the one hand to the painting, on the other they also refer to, or 'pick out', properties of the subject matter.[16]

Instead of following this tempting but misleading dichotomy, I am going to recall an important way in which pictorial thought can be said to emerge from the fluidity of the painter's activity, that is by the action of exemplification.[17] The concept of exemplification does not fall prey to the internal/external squabbles since it is a relation between work and world, a relation that describes the way that the work represents the world, consisting in both possession and reference.

Goodman's example is a tailor's book of cloth swatches. The swatches function as samples that *exemplify*, that is both possess and refer to certain properties. But exemplification is not a relation between every property of the swatch and the living room curtains, let us say. It is a sample of colour and texture but not of size or shape. If the department store delivered ten feet of curtain cut up into four-inch swatches you would be pretty upset! Similarly exemplification is a relation between the work and the world, a relation that means the work both possesses and makes reference to certain properties.[18] Thus, when the artist sets about selecting, organising and reorganising aspects of her subject matter in terms of the paint, she presents, by taking either literal or metaphorical possession of them, certain properties of the subject matter, *and* makes reference to them. The artist is thus constructing a specifically intentional relation; she is able to direct and shape her thought *to* the world, selecting, organising and reorganising aspects of the subject matter in terms of the painting materials. In selecting to paint a picture of a red-green apple on a table, and in selecting red-green paint, the work takes literal possession of the property 'red-green' and refers to that property in the apple on the table. Differently, however, in painting a waterfall (as in *Diana and Actaeon*) the painting does not literally have to be kept wet, rather the artist uses the sheen of the oil and the whiteness of paint, metaphorically to possess 'wetness' and at the same time refers to it in the subject matter. Gainsborough can therefore be said to be directing his mind towards the world

[16] Goodman (1978), 23-40.
[17] Goodman (1976), particularly 52-57.
[18] For more on this see A. Harrison (1999), in which he argues that pictures are like models, (including scientific experimental models and children's toys). Both pictures and models function by legitimising certain qualities, in the case of pictures it is loosely 'aesthetic qualities' that they make present.

and shaping it with the material of paint: he is thinking *with* materials.

Following this way of putting things, the *spectator's* role can usefully be conceived as collaborating with the maker. The 'maker' and 'spectator' are two roles within a single co-operative project rather than two isolated people. Both roles are involved in making, re-making, following and coming to understand a shared pattern of attention as articulated in the painting process. A shared understanding is assured for them in terms of a common intentional object.

RETURNING TO GAINSBOROUGH: THE REALISATION OF INTIMACY AND EMBARRASSMENT.

How do these rather technical sounding considerations about exemplification mesh with the problem of understanding the peculiarly personal and idiosyncratic *Diana and Actaeon* series? The group of works depicts what Ovid describes in his *Metamorphosis* when the young Prince, Actaeon, hunting in the forest, stumbles accidentally upon the Goddess Diana and her nymphs bathing in a grotto.[19] If we recall, the problem was that these works are very difficult to talk about given the standard patterns of inquiry. They are quite unlike anything else Gainsborough painted. Formally they look very awkward, even incompetent, and social explanation alone does not really demonstrate for the spectator an appropriate way of engaging with these peculiar works. So then the problem restates itself: are the works just extra stylistic glitches, examples of Gainsborough overstretching himself late in his career?

This is probably the most prevalent view. Rosenthal says, for example, in the catalogue to the recent Gainsborough exhibition at the Tate, that Gainsborough, 'appears to discard the iconographic possibilities of the subject which could, for instance, be about such serious ideas as the randomness of fate,' however, he goes on interestingly to say that the work reveals itself essentially as being, 'at best about imaginative, even erotic looking, and at worst about voyeurism...'.[20]

Yet does this 'at best' really make the most, for spectators, of what the works have to offer? By insisting on questions concerning the aesthetic agency of the artist, such as the missing question 'how was the painting made?' the works can be understood differently and

[19] It is suggested by Paulson (1975) that Gainsborough took the story from Addison's translation of Ovid.
[20] Rosenthal and Myrone (2003), 278.

more sympathetically as quite moving and perfectly serious pieces about the celebrated relation of a shared intimacy between Diana and her Nymphs and the intense and panicked consensual embarrassment that results from the accidental intrusion into that personal space by Actaeon.[21]

We know from various kinds of evidence that Gainsborough was shy of painting nudes, particularly women, and that fact is perhaps revealing in conjunction with this picture, but in another sense it really does not matter. What a theory of agency[22] shows, is that what *does* matter is the way in which the agitated, twisting, darting marks and lines that dash across the page, direct the spectator's imaginative engagement with the subject matter. The property of 'being made quickly with a darting gesture' means the lines literally possess a darting quality, which sustains the spectator's imagined relationship to the figures from the story, *as* Gainsborough depicts them. The spectator's notion of the panic and embarrassment as the figures run for cover, is directed by the swirling, darting marks, and the sense of the drama is heightened by the quite sharp contrast in tone. That is, the properties of the white chalk and those of the grey and black washes possess a literal contrast, which in the context of the works take on metaphorical significance in referring to the drama of the depicted scene.

The works then, have many properties that belong to them, but when looking in terms of the aesthetic agency of the artist, what slowly emerges is the notion that in organising the work as he has done, the artist has exemplified a certain kind of intentional relation to the world: he has embodied a particular thought with specific use of his materials, which the spectator can also thereby follow, understand, appreciate and call beautiful.[23]

CONCLUSION: ART HISTORY AND AESTHETICS

So there are good reasons to be less pessimistic about the relationship between art history and aesthetics, more than it seemed at the beginning of the paper.

If the *Diana and Actaeon* works by Gainsborough are understood in terms of the agency

[21] Whether we call the painting voyeuristic or not there remains in my view a *consensual embarrassment* and shock felt by Diana and Actaeon, in what is after all meant to be an accidental meeting.

[22] Following the last sentence it is worth making explicit that a theory of agency is different from biography.

[23] Notice what is called 'beautiful' here is not the thing depicted nor merely the formal qualities, but the artist's agency, the object *as* depicted, the virtues of mind *as* displayed in the action.

of the artist, that is, as the outcome of the artist's thought process, then they are made less obscure, less apparently incompetent, and shown to be perfectly serious works that articulate a particular kind of intentional relation. On the agency view the works can be understood more significantly as exemplifying a certain kind of disabling embarrassment that overwhelms Actaeon, Diana and her Nymphs and, indeed, Gainsborough as he pushes the boundaries of his own experience and practice. The works possess many properties but as a result of Gainsborough's actions—as a result of his selection and organisation of the materials—they come to exemplify a particular kind of attention to objects and relations between people. What I have identified as 'the thought of the picture'—the intense disabling embarrassment—does not then float behind the picture or in the artist's head[24] but is enacted in the material procedures of the paint. The benefit of putting things this way is that the spectator then comes to understand 'that thought' by reconstructing the same making process by which the artist made it intelligible to himself or herself. Here the sceptic has little room for manoeuvre.

If within art history aesthetic agency is given the importance that this paper argues it deserves, then the traditional categories of time and place can be enriched with the addition of the neglected category of *task*. So for example, as I said, this is not a phenomenon peculiar to Gainsborough. There are some significant stylistic similarities between the Gainsborough examples and works by Cézanne.[25] The point is, however, that Gainsborough's work does not just *look* similar rather, it shares a similar task or problem with Cézanne work. Moreover, the spectator can come to understand how the works embody a similar *thought content* as it is made manifest in each artist's practical solution to the 'problem situation' they faced. In painting the *Diana and Actaeon* series Gainsborough uncovers a pictorial concern about intimacy, embarrassment and anxiety that finds subsequent expression in Cézanne: The two artists, remote in time and place, share a relatable pictorial project.

Finally then, what the theory of agency demonstrates is that 'the aesthetic' cannot be limited within art history to a category of mere appearances or mannerisms but must be reconceived

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[24] Cf. Wollheim (1987), 18. When locating 'the intentional description' he says 'everything depends on what goes on in his [the artist] head' where as for the agency theory presented here, the intentional description depends upon the way the mind makes itself manifest in practice i.e. everything depends not upon 'mind' as opposed to 'matter' but upon the way mind infuses matter *in* the artist's practice.

[25] Cézanne, *Bathers* (c. 1903). Many of Cézanne's late series of bathers sketches share the features in question. For Cézanne's themes of touch and anxiety see Smith, (1996), 63-69.

as a category of intelligent and intelligible thought. As such, it can no longer be left in isolation from other forms of understanding but can function only in communion *with* them as one amongst a range of cognitive, epistemic and, perhaps only then, as moral, social and emotional values.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

CÉZANNE, Paul (c. 1903), *Bathers*, pencil and watercolour on paper, 22.4 x 31.5 cm. Private Collection.

GAINSBOROUGH, Thomas (c. 1784-6), *Diana and Actaeon*, oil on canvas, 158.1 x 18 cm. The Royal Collection, Waterhouse no. 1012.

—— (c.1784-6), *First Study for Diana and Actaeon*, chalk with washes on paper, 25.6 x 33.3 cm. Gainsborough's House, Sudbury.

—— (c.1784-6), *Second Study for Diana and Actaeon*, wash white on buff paper. Huntington Library, Art Collection and Botanical Gardens.

—— (c.1784-6), *Third Study for Diana and Actaeon*, chalk and washes, heightened with white body colour on paper, 27.5 x 35.4 cm. Cecil Higgins Art Gallery, Bedford.