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Review of Paul Thom, *Making Sense* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000) in the *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 80:1 (2002) 107-09.

Thom, Paul. *Making Sense. A Theory of Interpretation* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), pp. vii + 117, US\$59.95 (cloth), US\$17.95 (paperback).

An interesting point of disagreement among theories of interpretation is the treatment afforded the object of interpretation. Can it be conceived of as a stable object, such that all interpretations are interpretations of some object conceived as being in some kind of original or objective state? This would mean that say an interpretation of a Beethoven sonata would be understood as an interpretation of the original work more or less as conceived by the composer. This is the classicist position. Post-structuralists would consider this position naïve, believing instead that any object of interpretation is a cultural artefact that can only be accessed through the dense web of interpretation that already surrounds it such that the object of interpretation is understood to be changeable, fluid and relative, rather than stable.

Another point of disagreement among such theories is what counts as an interpretation. For example, are scientific explanations interpretations or can we only count as interpretation what we do when we make sense of art works like visual, musical, performance and literary works? The classicist would typically argue that to lump scientific explanation with making sense of art works as constituting the same kind of process, is to stretch the work of a theory of interpretation beyond usefulness (Currie, 1995). However, the post-structuralist takes a different view of this because

she perceives the phenomenon that the scientist sets out to explain as fluid, changeable and relative in a similar way to the artwork, embedded as our perception of it is, within a dense web of significance systems. With such a conception of the object of the scientist's explanation, conceiving of it as an object of interpretation can be philosophically interesting.

The distinctive feature of Thom's theory of interpretation is that it takes the classicist view regarding the stability of the object of interpretation, and the post-structuralist view regarding what counts as interpretation. Accordingly, he must admit the possibility that any one object of interpretation, stable though it be, can have multiple (yet possibly incommensurable) successful interpretations.

Thom solves the dilemma posed by the apparent contradiction between his classicist approach to the object-of-interpretation and his pluralism regarding admissible interpretations of the one object by identifying a middle term between the original object and the resulting interpretation. He conceptualises interpretation according to three terms: the object-of-interpretation, the object-as-represented and a governing concept.

The object-as-represented refers to what one takes to be the relevant and salient features of the object. This may be selective but as long as the interpreter is aiming for a comprehensive representation of the object and one that imbues the object with significance within a particular significance system, then the grounds for a successful interpretation are laid. Thom writes that if an object is represented in a way that does not aim to be comprehensive of the object, then what is going on is more a case of 'ransacking' and 'plundering' the object rather than interpreting it (79).

The next term in Thom's trilogy, the 'governing concept', is the concept under which the object-as-represented is subsumed in order to make sense of it (in the sense that the meaning is uncovered) or in order to give the object meaning (in the sense that the meaning is invented). Thom recognises either uncovering or inventing as valid approaches to interpretation. The first approach aims to be authoritative and the second approach aims to be playful.

Thom's particular rapprochement between classicist and post-structural approaches to 'interpretation' in conjunction with his conception of 'interpretation' according to his three terms, allows him to account in a philosophically interesting way for both scientific explanation and artistic-making-sense as cases of the same kind of process.

As an illustration of the authoritative approach to interpretation, consider the following two examples (two among many provided by Thom), one from science and one from performance. The Ancient Greek physicists selected rainbows and winds together with what we call stars and planets as calling for a single explanatory interpretation (the moderns having since revised and narrowed the object-of-interpretation). This object of interpretation was represented as astronomy. They subsumed this object-as-represented under natural explanation (linking object-as-represented with an explanation by means of natural laws) as their guiding concept (36, 38).

Now moving on to an example from the arts, Thom explains that Vladimir Horowitz's two recordings of the Liszt Piano Sonata in 1932 and 1978 respectively were indistinguishable in their object (Liszt's piano sonata) and in their object-as-represented (the same aspects of the sonata) but differed in their governing concepts.

Both shared as their governing concepts “raw excitement”, “delicate lyricism”, “washes of colour”, “flashing octaves” and “awesome technical command” but while the earlier version could be subsumed overall under impulsiveness, the older version was subsumed instead under relaxation (31). Here we have two different interpretations but the same object-of-interpretation and the same object-as-represented.

In addition to the authoritative approach to interpretation is the playful approach, an example of which, provided by Thom, is the parody. Thom writes that a parody might aim to ‘misunderstand’ its object in the course of making sense of it (68). ‘Misunderstand’ is perhaps the wrong term here. A parody could be said to represent its object sarcastically or ironically with the aim of highlighting the incongruence of its meaning within a particular significance system. This is not to ‘misunderstand’ its object. If it were, then a parody would not satisfy the criteria that Thom has identified as those which define a successful interpretation: comprehensiveness and significance. Thom’s use of the term ‘misunderstand’ here is perhaps motivated by a need to differentiate between interpretation and understanding. The only argument he gives that one is not the other is by using parody as a counter example. He writes that a parody is an interpretation that does not necessarily aim to understand its object (68). I think this example falls apart as a counter example on Thom’s own criteria for a successful interpretation. If a parody does not aim to understand its object then it cannot be said to be a comprehensive representation of its object; but if it is not a comprehensive representation of its object, then it does not qualify as an interpretation on Thom’s terms. So either a parody does aim to understand its object or it is not an interpretation. Therefore, a parody is not an example of an interpretation that seeks to misunderstand its object.

Perhaps the cost of developing a theory of interpretation that incorporates scientific explanation and making sense of art is that the concept of interpretation is indistinguishable from the concept of understanding. This relates back to the second of our original questions ‘What counts as an interpretation?’

If this is right and Thom’s ecumenical approach results in the collapse of interpretation into understanding, I am not sure that this is too high a price to pay for what he does achieve. For one thing, Thom’s account provides us with a very clear distinction between what it means to understand an object/work/phenomenon as opposed to simply registering it or absorbing it. Teachers might take note of this as an articulation of what it is they mean to have students do when they take themselves to be educating them rather than training them. Once a student has represented a work to herself and subsumed it under a governing concept, we judge her to have understood the work. Students who do not engage in this process are simply absorbing and regurgitating.

Secondly, and more significantly, Thom’s incorporation of scientific theories into his schema for making sense points to the fluidity relative to particular significance systems of scientific explanation. However, given his notion of the object -of- interpretation as stable, this should not be dismissed as some kind of post-modernist reduction of everything to artistic fancy; quite the contrary. The analogy works in the opposite direction. Science retains its objectivity. Rather it is artistic interpretation that is now acknowledged as constrained by its object in ways that parallel the object’s status in scientific explanation.

I think Thom’s case for equating scientific explanation and artistic-making-sense could be much stronger. There are examples available of scientific theories that explain

the same phenomenon (object-of-interpretation), and which have equal explanatory power (both are comprehensive of their object and imbue their object with significance) but which are constructed within incompatible conceptual frameworks (different objects-as-represented) leading to different governing concepts. In such cases, scientists choose between theories by employing aesthetic criteria, believing that the most beautiful theory will most likely turn out to be true (that is, have the most powerful application). There is a lot of material on this topic which draws one towards the conclusion *not* that science is less tied to objective properties of the world but rather that aesthetic choices are more tied or linked to objective properties of the world than previously imagined. I am not suggesting that Thom should have explored these leads but I do think that the scientific examples he includes do not exemplify strongly enough the intriguing interrelation between scientific explanation and artistic-making-sense which his overall theory would recognize. In so recognizing, Thom's theory jumps on the shoulders of other theories of interpretation, and with its broader view, promises to reveal more exciting and fruitful terrain than what we have been shown by adopting some of the other theories on this topic (see ch.1).

This is a very lucid and precise text, which is richly textured with illuminating and intriguing discussions of examples from painting, theatre, music, opera and the sciences. I would recommend it as a text for undergraduate courses on Interpretation; - *and I would have all teachers read chapter 3!*

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