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On Clive Bell's "Art and War"*

Bence Nanay

Clive Bell was not an ethicist. He was an aesthete, known for his very strong formalist views, according to which art has nothing to do with ethics and politics. At least that is the textbook description of his general stance. "Art and War" is a relatively unknown piece by him that has been ignored within art history partly because the relation between art on the one hand and ethics and politics on the other is much more complex here.

He gives a remarkably strong argument for the independence of art and politics—culminating in his slogan that "there is no such thing as patriotic art" (6). This is an important and interesting argument both for its implications for the way we should think about politics and for the way we should think about art. I will focus on the former here (leaving aside issues about how the version of formalism he needs to endorse in order for this argument to go through is more like Roger Fry's more sophisticated formalism than the programmatic and provocative statements Bell makes in his much quoted book, *Art*, written in the same year as this article). But it is important to emphasize that the paper is not primarily about art: its primary focus is the reach of the political.

Bell's argument in general and his claim that there is no such thing as patriotic art in particular may seem diametrically opposed to the course of the century between Bell's article and the present. These hundred years gave us the *Great German Art Exhibition* and the *Degenerate Art Exhibition* in the Third Reich, Stalin's obsession with socialist realism, and some less extreme examples of American and British patriotic art. It is also the century that made any kind of discourse about art (and especially the academic discourse about art in the majority of disciplines in the

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humanities) through and through political. But Bell was making a normative and not a descriptive claim: he was very much aware of the way art is misused and abused for political purposes (although he clearly had no idea about the extremes this abuse would reach in the decades after his article). He writes critically of the way the German bombing of the Reims cathedral was exploited for patriotic purposes in England by people who otherwise cared little for art (3–4). But he also saw art's potential for resisting the reach of the political.

What I take to be the most important piece of argument in the paper is Bell's emphasis on how when a patriot appreciates art, he or she "is carried into a world in which patriotism becomes meaningless" (6). Here, art appears as the antidote to our obsession with questionable political values. If we truly engage with art, political divides will become irrelevant—it makes no difference whether the artwork in question were made in Germany or in England. In other words, art can serve as a means of resisting the primacy of politics in our life. He repeatedly appeals to a parallel between art and philosophy (and mathematics) in this respect (see esp. 7–8 and 6): it doesn't matter whether a German or an American philosopher (or mathematician) came up with a certain proposition (or theorem): what matters is whether it's true. Similarly, it doesn't matter in which country a piece of music was composed or which country a painting was painted—as long as it provides for our aesthetic experience. And, conversely, just as a theorem or a philosophical theory can be appreciated anywhere in the world, regardless of where a symphony was composed, citizens of all countries can enjoy it. Art is not patriotic: it is universal.

And this is the take-home message of Bell's paper: art unites, rather than divides. It "transcends nationality" (6). It would be a mistake to dismiss this vision as a naive utopian picture of art bringing together people from different sides of the trench (or, to update the analogy a bit, uniting Republicans and Democrats). Bell asks us to consider what really matters. Is politics the end and art the mere means (maybe transforming all art into propaganda)? Or is art the ultimate value and politics something we need to consider as a potential obstacle to our enjoyment of art? This latter view is clearly Bell's choice (see esp. 2–3), but it could easily be seen as the caricature of aestheticism (and Bell is not doing much to dismiss this interpretation with his appeal to Archimedes absorbed in a mathematics problem in Syracuse in the midst of the Roman invasion [8]).

But maybe we can give a more charitable reading to this argument: namely, that a way of preventing people from attributing too much importance to bogus values like patriotism and nationalism is to give them values (like tolerance and a broadened sense of community) that transcend nationality. And art could serve this purpose. If we are just a

little bit more tolerant toward people of different culture or religion, having admired artworks (we don't have to be too elitist here: having watched films or television series or having listened to popular music) from that culture, this could be seen as an example of art bringing people together rather than turning them against one another.