

## **Aesthetic Formalism, Reactions and Solutions**

Mohammad Zoheir Bagheri Noaparast  
Khosrow Bagheri Noaparast

### **Abstract**

*It seems necessary to introduce the basic concepts used in this article i.e. formalism, anti-formalism and moderate formalism. Formalists believe that the aesthetic appreciation of an artwork generally involves an attentive awareness of its sensory or perceptual qualities and does not require knowledge about its non-perceptual properties. Anti-formalists on the other hand hold that none of the aesthetic properties in a work of art are formal. A number of philosophers have recently advocated a more moderate formalism. According to this view, although not all aesthetic qualities are formal, many are, and some artworks possess only formal aesthetic qualities. The quarrel among these three rival views concerns what sort of knowledge, if any, is required for appropriate aesthetic appreciation of an artwork. In what follows, we will give a brief exposition of these three viewpoints. Subsequently, we will give our preferred position with regard to these views.*

**Keywords:** *Aesthetic formalism, anti-formalism, aesthetics, Nick Zangwill.*

## **1. Formalism, anti-formalism and moderate formalism**

Before getting involved with the details of the three viewpoints, it seems necessary to introduce the notions of aesthetic and non-aesthetic properties and formal and non-formal properties. Observable properties are properties that can make a difference in our perceptual experience of the artwork. In contrast, non-observable properties refer to instances such as the artist's intention, the artist's love life, the artist's mental health, the artwork's history.

Aesthetic properties are those observable characteristics of works of art that constitute features such as being unified, balanced, integrated, lifeless, serene, somber, dynamic, powerful, vivid, delicate, moving, trite, sentimental, tragic, graceful, delicate, dainty, elegant, and beautiful.

On the other hand, non-aesthetic properties can be observable and non-observable. The former like being red and the latter like originality.

### **1-1. Formal and Non-formal Properties**

Formalists like Bell (1914) regard lines, shapes, and colors which are within the frame as formal aesthetic features. However, the representational characteristics of works of art are not entirely determined by what is in the frame but also by characteristics such as the history of the work of art or the artist's intentions.

It might be thought that an easy way to account for formal properties is to say that they are determined merely by sensory or physical properties except in the case that the physical properties are in relation to other things and other times. However, some philosophers would hold that aesthetic properties in fact refer to dispositions that activate responses in human beings without taking it to be necessary that these dispositions are formal properties. Zangwill stipulates that the word 'narrow' contains sensory and non-relational physical properties along with the dispositions constituting aesthetic properties. In addition, he stipulates the word 'broad' for anything else: "Formal properties are entirely determined by narrow non-aesthetic properties, whereas non-formal aesthetic properties are partly determined by broad non-aesthetic properties." (Zangwill, 1999, p. 611) He gives the history of production of a work of art as an example for broad property because it is neither a sensory property nor a non-relational physical property and nor a dispositional characteristic.

## 1-2. Formalism

We can talk about aesthetic and non-aesthetic properties when considering a work of art. The aesthetic properties are determined by non-aesthetic properties; a formalist should accept this much. The scope and relevance of non-aesthetic properties that determine aesthetic properties are what parts the formalists from the other two groups. (Zangwill, 1999, p. 610)

Walton gives this definition of formalism which is in fact privative: "Circumstances connected with a work's origin... have no essential bearing on an assessment of its aesthetic nature". (Walton, 1970, p.334) But how would a positive definition look like? We can advance it as follows. Formalism describes an approach in which the formal qualities of a work such as line, shape, and color are regarded as self-sufficient for its appreciation, and all other considerations such as representational or history of work of art are treated as secondary or redundant. The essence of art is given through the formal unity of an artwork, involving such features as structure, balance, and harmony. Our appreciation of art lies in recognizing these formal qualities and, furthermore, in responding to them. The content of an artwork and its relations with the outside world are subordinate to its formal features. For example, the beauty of a painting consists in the relations of color and line.

Clive Bell is a prominent formalist. He holds that all works of art produce an emotion in the viewer. This emotion is not different but the same for all people. There must be a factor common to all works of art that produces in the viewer a state of Aesthetic Emotion. This common factor is form. Significant form is a term used by Bell to describe forms that are arranged by some unknown and mysterious laws. Thus, all art must contain not merely form, but significant form. Under formalism, art is appreciated not for its expression but instead for the forms of its components. Examples of these forms include lines, curves, shapes, and colors. Abstract art is an example of art that is not representative and thus is most likely to be appreciated as art in terms of their forms rather than their content.

Bell's position is not confined to what is said above. He advocates a strong version of formalism. Accordingly, nothing else about an object is in any way relevant to assessing whether it is a work of art, or aesthetically valuable. Representational aspect of a painting, for example, is completely irrelevant to evaluating it aesthetically. Hence, he holds that knowledge of the historical context of a painting or the intention of the painter is unnecessary for the appreciation of visual art: "To appreciate a work of art

we need bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its ideas and affairs, no familiarity with its emotions." (Bell, 1914, p. 27)

It is obvious that Bell is interested in abstract art since there is no representation in it. But, how can we give value to paintings of people? This could be done by paying attention to the relation between the figures in the painting; in this way its representational aspects are evaded. But it seems impossible to ignore the figures in paintings and just paying attention to brush strokes emerging into one another. It may only be possible in abstract art.

Formalism has been under scrutiny. Here, I am going to mention three tenable criticisms. First of all, the term 'significant form' used by Bell is quite problematic. In describing it he refers to the form arranged by some unknown and mysterious laws. He does not define 'significant form' directly. Therefore, we naturally look for a definition of 'unknown and mysterious laws'. However, he has not come up with such definition. This makes 'significant form' a vague notion which no one can understand.

The second criticism of formalism comes from Zangwill. His criticism concentrates on the implausibility of differentiation between aesthetic and representational properties. He believes that formalists put these two along side each other. Although, he holds that these two kinds of properties are multiplied and not simply added. Zangwill clarifies this point with an example: "Something is not just a beautiful pattern *and* a picture of a tree but *beautiful as a picture of* a tree. The two properties are not merely *added* but *multiplied*." (Zangwill, 1999, p.615) He stresses on the representational characteristic of the work of art instead of limiting it to an abstract design. This is because we should understand the representational function of the work of art if we want to understand it altogether. He points out that the formal characteristics are essential but this does not justify their extreme formal position.

The third criticism concerns the properties that have a relational nature. Fenner holds that formalists do not capture this kind of properties: "If we believe that a case for the aesthetic merits of an object (art or otherwise) includes citation of properties that speak to the representational relation between that object and some other, formalism does not have a place for this." (Fenner, 2008, pp. 128-129) As it is obvious in this phrase, a relational property refers to the relation between a work of art and a distinct object that provides aesthetic merits for the work of art one way or another.

### 1-3. Anti-formalism

Walton defines anti-formalism in this way: “Facts about the origins of works of art have an *essential* role in criticism that aesthetic judgments rest on them in an absolutely fundamental way.” (Walton, 1970, p.337)

Anti-formalism states that in order to appreciate a work of art aesthetically we must always see that work in a historical context. They hold that the aesthetic value and even the identity of a work of art depend on its place in the realm of art as a historical situation. This is exactly opposed to what Bell holds: ‘...what does it matter whether the forms that move [us] were created in Paris the day before yesterday or in Babylon fifty centuries ago?’ (1914, pp. 45-46). Anti-formalists assert that a work only has aesthetic significance in the context of other works in the tradition and category in which the work is located.

Gombrich, an anti-formalist, developed an imaginary example of physically identical works by different artists and invited us to judge that they are aesthetically different (Gombrich, 1960, p. 313). Such arguments are supposed to show that a work’s physical nature does not suffice for its aesthetic properties and that history also plays a role.

In the same vein, Walton argues that two identical objects can have different aesthetic properties based on the category in which they are perceived. He argues that the *Guernica* perceived in the category of paintings and the same work perceived in the category of *guernicas* would appear to have different aesthetic properties: “[Walton] thinks that in order to make an aesthetic judgment about a work we must see it under art-historical categories, such as ‘cubist’ or ‘sonata’”. (Zangwill, 2000b, p.479)

Category has been described by Walton with segregating three features i.e. standard (if objects belong to a category in virtue of having the feature), contra-standard (if objects having a feature tend to disqualify them from belonging to the category) and variable (if the feature has nothing to do with the category). The categories we perceive for work, determine not only what aesthetic properties we perceive it as having, but also what aesthetic properties it does in fact have. (Walton, 1970, p. 340) If the following conditions hold then one can correctly categorize a work ‘W’ within a category ‘C’: “(i) The presence in W of a relatively large number of features standard (in a sense explained) with respect to C. (ii) The fact that W perceived in C is more interesting, pleasing, worth experiencing than it is perceived in alternative ways. (iii) The fact that the artist intended or expected W to be perceived in C. (iv) The fact that C is well

established in and recognized by the society in which W was produced.” (Walton, 1973, p.267)

#### 1-4. Moderate Formalism

Moderate formalists came to the conclusion that formalists like Bell have been exaggerating the case when mentioning that all aesthetic qualities depend on nothing beyond the sensory surface of the object. They hold that some aesthetic qualities are as mentioned. (Parsons, 2004, p.20)

Kant introduces the notion of ‘dependent’ beauty in contrast to free beauty: “There are two kinds of beauty; free beauty (*pulchritudo vaga*) or merely dependent beauty (*pulchritudo adhaerens*). The first presupposes no concept of what the object ought to be; the second does presuppose such a concept and the perfection of the object in accordance therewith. The first is called the (self-subsistent) beauty of this or that thing; the second, as dependent upon a concept (conditioned beauty), is ascribed to objects which come under the concept of a particular purpose.” (Kant, 1914, section 16) Referring to this Kantian distinction, Zangwill states: “And if a work of art is dependent beautiful, its beauty is determined in part by the functional properties that were bestowed on it by a certain history of production. In particular, the artist’s *intentions* are the source of the function.” (Zangwill, 1999, p.612) The music played in a restaurant has a function therefore it is a dependent beauty. Its function might increase your appetite. This kind of musical beauty arises when music serves some non-musical function or purpose. This music has a certain non-musical function and the aesthetic qualities of this music are not separate from that function but are an expression of it. However, there are many aesthetic properties that are purely formal, and there are many purely formal works. Some paintings are entirely abstract. Moreover, most representational paintings have formal aesthetic features among their other aesthetic features. Moderate formalists insist on the importance of both formal and non-formal properties: “The moderate formalist *concedes* that representational works have non-formal aesthetic properties. And he *concedes* that ‘contextual’ works have non-formal aesthetic properties— where contextual works are works that are intended to be seen only in the light of other works. But the moderate formalist insists that there are *some* works of art that *only* have formal aesthetic properties.” (ibid, p. 613)

In order to defend moderate formalism, Zangwill first challenges formalism and anti-formalism. In what follows I will bring in his critiques and finally summarize his defense of moderate formalism.

Zangwill puts forward an argument against formalism including two premises. The first premise indicates that representational properties of a work are determined partly by their history. The second premise holds that aesthetic properties are partly determined by what they represent given that beauty is constituted by representation rather than being added to the representation. The history of a work of art is determinative regarding aesthetic properties thus they are not purely formal. (Zangwill, 2000b, p.481)

Zangwill talks about the contextual art as an example of refuting formalism. These works should be perceived “in light of or juxtaposed to other works of art.” In these cases the history of works of art partly determines the aesthetic property of that work. But this conclusion cannot be generalized to abstract and non-contextual art, and it cannot be generalized to the non-representational and non-contextual features of representational and contextual works of art. (Zangwill, 2000b, p. 483)

Zangwill has an implicit argument against anti-formalism represented by an example: a Roman statue is a man with wrinkled forehead and serious face what, understanding these representational properties we need to know its origins: “If (Walton) is right only about representational properties then it could still be the case that many works of art, the abstract ones, have aesthetic properties that do not depend on their history of production. Formalism might yet be true of them.” (Zangwill, 2000b, p.482)

Zangwill comes up with a case that defends moderate formalism on the basis of that case. This case refers to what is called ‘plastic form’ that relates to formal properties of pictures that originate in the spatial relationships between the items which are regarded to be represented. An instance of such qualities can be found in Poussin’s paintings. These properties could not be regarded as formal proper because they are determined partly by representational conventions which are in turn under the influence of the history of a work. One possible solution is to consider a wider conception of ‘formal’ so that it will include both the standard meaning of formal and these plastic forms. Though not successful, this suggestion can be considered as a support for moderate formalism because formal and non-formal properties are involved in this category. Zangwill refers to this point by saying that: “So moderate formalism is right, even if we operate with the wide notion of a formal property.” (Zangwill, 1999, p. 617)

Zangwill mentions that the art-category argument made by Walton, if proved, is a lethal strike to moderate formalism and formalism. Unlike representational argument

this involves all works of art. The art-category discussed by Walton was described above. He uses the Guernica thought experiment to show that the aesthetic character of a work of art is mainly determined by art-historical categories. For example: in a culture instead of creating painting an artist creates what is called a Guernica that is similar to Picasso's. The only difference is that they are three-dimensional and have different sized and shaped bumps. So a flat work exactly like Picasso's which is "violent, dynamic, and vital" may seem "bland, dull and boring" in that culture.

Zangwill responds to Walton's argument as follows. He accepts that a flat guernica is less lively compared to most guernicas as a class. On the other hand, Picasso's *Guernica* is 'vital' compared to most paintings that are not lively as a class. However, he claims that it is consistent to hold that the flat guernica is as lively as Picasso's *Guernica*. "The two might be equivalent in terms of degree of liveliness and also equivalent in respect of other aesthetic properties." (Zangwill, 2000b, p.487)

Moderate formalists appeal to a benign dilemma in order to defend their position. According to this dilemma, at least in some cases, either the properties are referred to by the category are narrow properties being aesthetically relevant, or else they are broad properties without being aesthetically relevant. Zangwill admits that some works of art are representational and some others are contextual. However, he maintains that in these cases the dilemma does not hold because there are broad properties being aesthetically relevant. The point wherein the benign dilemma does hold includes the works of art which are neither representational nor contextual. (Zangwill, 2000b, p.493)

Facing objections to moderate formalism, Zangwill (2000a) has classified his defenses into three categories i.e. tactical retreat, irrelevance, and benign dilemma. For example, in dealing with representational and contextual properties, he suggests tactical retreat; in the case of the necessity of knowledge of other works for determining aesthetic judgment he appeals to irrelevance; and finally benign dilemma is used in the case of art works which are neither contextual nor representational.



## 2. Criticisms against Zangwill

Concerning Zangwill's claim as to much of art works are non-contextual and non-representational, Parsons maintains that only a tiny fraction of artworks within the human history is non-representational. And in the twentieth century only abstract art is non-representational. In addition, he claims it is not clear that how much of the abstract art works are non-representational. Mondrian's mature works are termed 'truly abstract' by Zangwill; however, Mondrian has given titles to his mature works e.g. "Broadway Boogie Woogie", which undermines their being purely abstract. (Parsons, 2004, p. 21)

To be purely formal, a work of art should be non-contextual as well as non-representational. Zangwill claims that much of art works are like this. (Zangwill, 2001, p. 89) Given Zangwill's definition of contextual in terms of intention of artists in order for his work to be seen in the light of other works (Zangwill, 2001, p. 103), there will be very few non-contextual works. This is because the artist though covertly will assume that his work should be compared to those of others. Even if the artist would refrain from doing so the audience will naturally compare his work with other works and this comparison affects their appreciation of the work of art. If we accept the plausible view that explicit intention of the artist is not the main source of rendering the art work contextual then many works of art will be contextual, therefore many non-representational works will be contextual as well. Thus, formalism will be an explanation for only a tiny fraction of art works. (Parsons, 2004, p.22)

Apart from claiming that aesthetic formalism explains only a tiny fraction of art works, Parsons puts forward a further critique to the effect that Zangwill has not been able to meet Walton's objections. Walton has introduced six kinds of category-dependent aesthetic property: Representational properties; being dynamic, violent, or lifeless; displaying order, inevitability, or correctness; being lyrical or energetic; possessing tension; and being shocking or disturbing. Zangwill has accepted that the first and the last one are category-dependent however, he claims that the other four are not. There is no enough space here to give the details of this challenge. However, on the whole, Parsons believes that Zangwill fails to refute the other four as being category-dependent.

Another objection can be leveled against moderate formalism. It concentrates on the originality of the work of art being a historical matter and at the same time determining the aesthetic value. (Levinson, 1980, pp. 10-11)

Zangwill replies by distinguishing between aesthetic value and artistic value. By relating originality to artistic value rather than aesthetic value he concludes that this objection does not hold. This is because, according to him, originality determines the artistic value of an art work compared to the previous ones. However, an art work can be aesthetically adequate in having elegance, beauty, and delicacy, even though it might be artistically repetitive. (Zangwill, 2000a, p. 381)

### **3. Conclusion**

Curtain (1982, p. 319) identifies a merit in formalism on the ground that in comparison between form and content, the formal elements are more satisfying and elevating because they ‘inhere in the work itself’ while content refers to representational elements outside of the work of art. Consequently instinct, charm, and content rest on one side, whereas imagination, pure beauty, and form are on the opposite side. Formal properties are responsible for pure beauty and produced by imagination whereas non-formal properties are in charge of charm and inspired by instinct.

We claim, so far as formalism is concerned, ‘Form’ provides the objective ground of art and to gain an objective standpoint we need to emphasize and consider formal properties to a great extent. The less we aim at this goal, the more we get closer to the boundaries of subjectivity which makes aesthetic judgment and evaluation arbitrary. From a formalist's point of view taking historical importance of a painting into consideration is treating it as a document and not as aesthetic object.

The intention of the artist that is a non-formal element is quite substantial in shaping a work of art as far as artistic, rather than aesthetic, value is concerned. Suppose a fire in a building leads to the appearance of a beautifully shaped object. In this case, something has been made by an accident and it provokes a sense of beauty inside you. Depending on what stratagem in terms of aesthetic formalism you hold, calling this object a work of art would vary.

Moderate formalists and extreme formalists hold that formal elements play a role in the aesthetic realm, even though the former conceives it to be partly and the latter entirely. Even though, a little historical evidence (e.g. abstract art) exists to support their claim, but this shows that the entire scope of aesthetics is not a sovereign of anti-formalism and places a limitation for generalizing claims about art about it being formal, anti-formal, or moderate formal. Art has not yet been completed and entirely

new schools and thoughts as well as new works will emerge in art as time will pass and it is not certain that the new works of art will fall under anti-formalism or formalism. Just because most of the works of art have been anti-formalist in nature up to now does not guarantee that future works will be of that nature too. This is because induction might face colorful swans every now and then.

It would be promising if we take an open attitude towards the future works of art without categorizing them beforehand. In this manner it would be possible to examine each work *ad hoc* in order to see to what extent it might support or undermine formalism, anti-formalism, or moderate formalism. This could lead to the emergence of new and perhaps more capable aesthetic points of view. Otherwise, we will be condemned to a Procrustes type of analysis in a malignant manner.

## References

- Bell, Clive. (1914). *Art*. IndyPublish.com. Boston: Massachusetts.
- Curtin, Deane W. (1982). "Varieties of Aesthetic Formalism", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 40, no. 3, pp. 315-326
- Fenner, David. (2008). *Art in Context: Understanding Aesthetic Value*. Swallow Press: Ohio University Press, Athens, Ohio.
- Gombrich, Ernst. (1960). *Art and Illusion. A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*. London: Phaidon.
- Kant, Immanuel. (1914). *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*. Translated by J. H. Bernard. London: MacMillan and co, limited.
- Levinson, Jerrold. (1980). "What a Musical Work Is", *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 77.1, pp. 5-28
- Parsons, Glenn. (2004). *Moderate Formalism as a Theory of the Aesthetic*, *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, vol. 38, no. 3. pp. 19-35.
- Walton, Kendall. (1970). *Categories of Art*. *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 79, no. 3, pp. 334-367
- Walton, Kendall. (1973). "Categories and Intentions: A Reply", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 32, no. 2, pp. 267- 268
- Zangwill, Nick. (2000a). *Defusing Anti-Formalist Arguments*. *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol.40, no. 3, pp. 367-383.
- Zangwill, Nick. (1999). *Feasible aesthetic formalism*. *Nous*, vol. 33, no. 4, pp. 610-629.
- Zangwill, Nick. (2000b). *In Defense of Moderate Formalism*. *The Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 50, no. 201, pp. 476-493.

Zangwill, Nick. (2001). *The Metaphysics of Beauty*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.