Introduction

The descriptive basis of art history is extremely familiar. It centres on the discovery of who created which works, what subject matters such works are intended to represent, how they came to be commissioned and/or conceived and executed, what kind of audience they were intended for, how they were received by this audience, how they have been interpreted subsequently, and what relationship they have to works that preceded them.

This network of aspects is, however, incomplete. For whilst it offers the descriptive basis for a historical analysis of any given artwork, it presupposes that art is worthy of such attention. *But how is this possible?* Why does art deserve this kind of detailed historical analysis, and why, indeed, has, say, work *x* been singled out for investigation rather than works *y* or *z*? An answer to these questions forms the *normative* basis of art history and of the philosophical definition of art. It is a basis that has, to date, been at best only partially understood. To set the scene for its understanding, it is worth considering some recent developments.

In the last quarter of a century the discipline of art history has radically questioned the basis of its own procedures. This questioning has taken two general forms. The first is a scepticism concerning the validity of 'high art' and formalist approaches to the understanding of it.[1] This approach is strongly influenced by those modes of poststructuralist thought which emphasize the shifting and precarious aspects of language and its various employments. A consequence of this view is an unwillingness to accept either the fixity of intellectual categories or the idea of there being clear boundaries between them. Those viewpoints that do not accept this scepticism are commonly dismissed as mere 'essentialism'. They are taken to achieve their clarity of procedure

[1] The work of Rosalind Krauss, Griselda Pollock, Carole Duncan, Victor Burgin and to some degree Norman Bryson is representative of this tendency.

through unwarranted 'closure', that is the passing-off of ephemeral notions (determined by the interests of the ruling white male middle class) as if they were timeless truths. Such an essentialist approach is taken to be fundamentally 'ahistorical'.

This sceptical art history has achieved some useful results in directing attention to the social history of art, but in recent years this orientation has taken on almost imperialist dimensions. Even with the best social historians – such as T. J. Clark – one can be forgiven for wondering whatever happened to 'art' over and above its function as visual documentation of the social and historical circumstances of its production.[2] Indeed, one can be forgiven even more for wondering whatever happened to the distinctiveness of the individual media (painting, drawing, print, etc.) and their specific ways of mediating social content. The attitude seems to be 'Well, yes – it is a painting – but that's of no significance except insofar as paintings are the kinds of things which can carry documentary meaning.'

What I am describing here is the way in which a mode of art history is actively redefining what art is, on the basis of its own narrowly conceived historical and political interests. Art's very existence is reduced to the original context of its production and reception, that is to those features that are major objects of art historical and curatorial concern. The artwork is treated, in effect, as something created for the purposes of art historians, curators and other managerial functionaries. Artistic production becomes, thereby, a mere means to curatorial production.

Now if the sceptical approach were valid, we would have to live with this conclusion. However, it is not. The social history of art is a vital dimension of art history, but it has no entitlement to remake the phenomenon of art in the image of its own interests. There are two reasons why: on the one hand the poststructuralist theories that seem to ratify the sceptical strategies are actually wrong – as I have shown at great length elsewhere;[3] on the other hand, the sceptical viewpoint fails to negotiate key connections between the artistic image and the very possibility of self-consciousness, and between the semantic and syntactic structure of the pictorial image and the horizon of diachronic history.

These connections are of the most *decisive* import. They are at the core of art's normative significance – as phenomena with an intrinsic value over and above its mere documentary function. This value is not based on formal properties *per se*, but rather on the pictorial image

[2] See, for example, his book *The Painting of Modern Life*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1999.
[3] For example, in chapter 1 of my *Critical Aesthetics and Postmodernism*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1993.

understood as a *formative power* that expresses constant factors in human experience. In order for this power to become an object of appreciation, however, a second level of normative significance is also involved. This involves the image transcending its documentary functions. Such transcendence is effected by the relation between the distinctive individual features of the artwork and the way in which these enlarge or develop the scope of pictorial imaging as a formative power. To recognize this emergence requires that the work be positionable within a comparative horizon of diachronic history (i.e., the horizon of sustained chronologically successive development). This, indeed, is the basis of art itself. For when a pictorial image stands out by virtue of its positive differences from other such images, this means that we are prompted to attend to *how* it represents, rather than what it represents. The work transcends its documentary function as a mere picture, and becomes art.

If this normative theory is correct, it means that there is a conceptual connection between the definition of art and diachronic history. And this relational character means that the connection is far more than a mere 'essentialist' discourse of timeless essences. Rather it focuses on the specific character of pictorial *production* in relation to active history. By so doing it gives due consideration to both the artist and conditions of reception. It also overcomes the too rigidly drawn distinction between the 'historical' and the 'ahistorical' insofar as it invests the artwork with a *transhistorical* significance (a term which will be explained in chapter 4).

Given these claims, the question arises as to how a normative theory should be substantiated. In this respect, we are assisted by a second aspect of art history's recent interrogation of its basic procedures – namely the widespread interest in art historiography, which has developed since Michael Podro's work on the critical historians of art. This has directed attention to the key working categories used by Riegl, Wölfflin, Panofsky and others, and, as a consequence of this, to the problem of diachronic history. Whilst none of these historians provide a wholly satisfactory set of art historical categories, they provide useful material that can be critically developed so as to provide a viable basis for art history.

In this work, therefore, I shall proceed as follows. Part One of my book will take the form of a philosophical interrogation of tradition. Chapters 1 and 2, respectively, will address some key formalist approaches to the understanding of figurative and non-figurative art, and of ornament. It will be argued that such approaches are severely restricted in terms of their understanding of diachronic history. Chapter 3 will then broach a

more viable theory – derived from Panofsky and Cassirer – which enables pictorial art to be understood at the appropriate level of symbolic and historical complexity.

Part Two of my book will both extend and go beyond this approach in a single extended Chapter on the fundamental categories of art history. In particular it will link the picture to constants in experience, and will clarify the ontology of the pictorial image in great detail. On the basis of the relation between this ontology and diachronic history, the notion of a *canon* of art history will be given a sustained philosophical justification. It will be offered, in effect, as the foundation of a normative definition of art.

The chapters in Part Three embody a further development of this approach. They apply the basic theory from Part Two, so as to formulate theories of meaning for abstract art, box-formats, and Duchamp inspired Conceptual Art. In this way, the normative approach to the history and definition of art is shown not only to encompass but also to illuminate putatively unamenable examples.

Throughout this work I utilize the philosophical standpoint and aesthetic theory which I have developed in previous works.[4] This combines analytic philosophy, the corporeal phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty and Cassirer, Kant and Hegel, and the occasional borrowing from post-structuralism. I also follow a specific theory of pictorial representation which is set out adequately for working purposes as the text progresses. For those readers with a more specialist interest in this topic I enclose a detailed exposition of it as an Appendix.

[4] Namely *ibid.*; *Art and Embodiment: from Aesthetics to Self-Consciousness*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1993; and *The Language of Twentieth-Century Art: a Conceptual History*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1997.

PART I

CHAPTER 1

Formalism, art history and effective historical difference

The rise of formalist approaches to the understanding of art is clearly bound up with the desire to ratify modernist tendencies. However, the link with modernity goes deeper still, reaching, in fact, to its very origins in the culture and society of Enlightenment Europe. For an Enlightenment thinker such as Kant, there is a universal standpoint from which constants in human experience and history can be grasped and clearly articulated. Formalist historians, aestheticians and critics take themselves to have found such a standpoint. They feel able to offer a narrative that overcomes those – such as Vasari's – which centre upon naïve notions of organic growth and decay. More than this, they adopt the analytic means characteristic of Kantian thought, that is the resolution of a specific domain of experience into those categories and structures that are inherent to it.

Of course, in postmodern times this strategy has been found to be problematic. In this chapter, therefore, I will address the limits and scope of formalism by critically examining the theories of Bell, Wörringer and Greenberg – major exemplars of formalism's basic varieties. I shall be concerned, in particular, to identify their misunderstandings of the relation between form, history and aesthetic value.

I

The first variety to be considered is aesthetic formalism. This holds that what separates art from other modes of artifice is the possession of formal qualities – pertaining to the structure of appearance – that provoke a distinctive aesthetic emotion in both creator and viewer. The origins of this approach are to be found in Kant's aesthetic theory. Specifically, he argues that aesthetic judgements are sufficiently characterized by four characteristics. I shall focus on the two of these that are most important. The first is disinterestedness – 'the faculty of estimating an object of

delight or aversion apart from any interest'.[1] In order to experience such pleasure or displeasure, it is not presupposed that we know what kind of thing the object of our pleasure is; neither are we concerned with broader questions of its practical significance. The reason for this is that our pleasure is provoked simply by structural relations in the way the object appears to the senses. Kant describes these relations as 'the form of *finality* in an object, so far as perceived in it *apart from the representation of an end*'.[2] What this amounts to is a perceptual exploration of such things as shape, line, mass, density and texture in relation to both one another and the object's phenomenal fabric as a whole.

Kant's position in relation to art is actually an extremely complex one, which goes beyond formalism. The formalist account of aesthetic judgement just outlined, indeed, is one which he links primarily to the appreciation of nature. However, Kant's nineteenth-century successors – such as Pater and Whistler – apply it to art, and this approach comes to define the dominant tendency in twentieth-century aesthetic formalism.

One of its most emphatic exponents is Clive Bell, in his book *Art* (1914). Bell's key concept is that of *significant form*, which he defines as 'a combination of lines and colours (counting white and black as colours) that move me aesthetically'.[3] In such responses, a form is enjoyed for its own sake as an 'end in itself'.

This experience presupposes only two basic capacities. The first is sheer aesthetic sensitivity; the second, a knowledge of form and colour and three-dimensional space. Questions such as what a form represents or what practical significance it has are entirely secondary. As Bell puts it, 'a realistic form may be as significant as part of the design, as an abstract. But if a representative form has value, it is as form, not as representation. The representative element in a work of art may or may not be harmful; always it is irrelevant.'[4] Hence Bell is led to the conclusion that '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. Art transports us from the world of man's activity to a world of aesthetic exaltation.'[5]

Now in these remarks Bell is clearly asserting the autonomy of art, by linking it sometimes to the criteria of disinterestedness and formal finality by which Kant defines aesthetic judgement. However, we will

[1] Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. J. C. Meredith, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1973, p. 50.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 80.
[3] Clive Bell, *Art*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1914, p. 12.
[4] *Ibid.*, p. 25.
[5] *Ibid.*

recall that Kant links the aesthetic to the appreciation of nature. With what justification, then, does Bell transfer it to art? The answer to this question is complex and requires consideration of that neglected chapter in Bell's book entitled 'The Metaphysical Hypothesis'. Here the author allows that whilst the 'material beauty' of nature can move us, it does not do so in the same way as the beauty of significant form in art – or at least not unless we, in effect, see it as art.

Art's primacy in this respect is bound up with its metaphysical and religious significance. On these questions, Bell is markedly less confident than he is in relation to aesthetic emotion. Matters come to a head when he attempts to speculatively explain the grounds of our enjoyment of form as 'an end in itself', that is, why significant form *is* significant. Consider the following passage:

> if an object considered as an end in itself moves us more profoundly . . . than the same object considered as a means to human interests . . . we can only suppose that when we consider anything as an end in itself we become aware of that in it which is of greater moment than any qualities it may have acquired from keeping company with human beings. Instead of recognizing its accidental and conditioned importance, we become aware of its essential reality, of the God in everything, of the universal in the particular, of the all-pervading rhythm.[6]

On these terms, aesthetic emotion is 'the echo of some more ultimate harmony',[7] that which 'lies behind the appearance of all things'.[8] The artist's treatment of form, therefore, is one which purifies and frees it from mundane associations, in a way that goes beyond mere natural beauty.

Given this correlation of the aesthetic and metaphysical *per se*, it is hardly surprising that Bell goes on to claim that artistic change is closely tied to changes in religious sensibility. As he puts it, 'we shall expect to find that ages in which the creation of significant form is checked are ages in which the sense of reality is dim, and that these ages are ages of spiritual poverty'.[9] Broadly speaking, Bell identifies two dominant tendencies in the history of art; the first is vital and authentic and represents the intense religious spirit of Byzantium; the other is secular and naturalistic and derives from the excesses of imperial Rome.

This leads Bell to reverse a major judgement of the art-historical tradition. Rather than see the high Renaissance as a standard of excellence by which other epochs must be judged, he sees it instead as a kind of decadence. In his words, 'the art of the fifteenth century was further

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 69. [7] *Ibid.*, p. 71. [8] *Ibid.*, p. 69. [9] *Ibid.*, p. 101.

from grace than that of the Giottesque painters of the fourteenth. And the whole output of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries is immeasurably inferior to the great Byzantine and Romanesque production of the eleventh and twelfth.'[10] He even goes so far as to claim that no more than one in a hundred of the artworks produced between 1450 and 1850 can be properly described as art!

Now given such statements as these, it is hardly surprising that when Bell's theory is cited in contemporary discussion it is usually as the object of wholly negative criticism or even ridicule. I would like, however, to subject his theory to a more positive line of criticism. First, in arguing that the aesthetic value of artistic form, and, indeed, the dynamics of artistic change are connected to metaphysical and religious sensibility, Bell is in effect acknowledging art's relative autonomy. In this respect one might return to the contrast between nature and art. It may be, for example, that Kant was right to construe our aesthetic response to nature as one which is wholly autonomous – centring on a form's capacity to stimulate our perceptual faculties. However, whilst our aesthetic response to art may involve such stimulation it *must* involve something more – in order to do justice to the fact that artistic form is the product of conscious human activity. Bell's metaphysical hypothesis is an attempt to come to terms with this. His aesthetic emotion in art is autonomous from responses to objects in their everyday practical significance, for it engages with deeper intuitions concerning the place of self-consciousness in the universe.

The problem is, however, that Bell does not adequately explain this relation between the aesthetic and the metaphysical. This leaves him open to the putative objection that, in his theory, aesthetic emotion and spiritual intensity amount to the same thing. The objects or situations that provoke them may be different, but the emotional state of ultimate exaltation is the same in both. The objection is, however, not well founded. For whilst aesthetic and metaphysical responses may be grounded on some common truth, it could be the case that the aesthetic articulation of this has some dimension of significance that metaphysical thought alone does not. Bell himself points us tentatively in this direction, to his claim that 'significant form conveys to us an emotion felt by its creator'.[11] This means, of course, that in art we are not simply responding to some truth embodied in the work, but also to the artist's personal way of articulating this. Unfortunately, whilst Bell presents such a position in outline, he fails to develop it in any depth or with any clarity.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 154. [11] *Ibid.*, p. 50.