

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-41926-0 - Explanation and Value in the Arts

Edited by Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 1

## Interests, values, and explanations

---

SALIM KEMAL *and* IVAN GASKELL

Paintings, novels, and poems represent objects or describe events by giving order to material that is itself of visual or literary interest: the objects and events become available through the medium in which they are formulated. The visual interest of Matisse's *La fenêtre ouverte* lies in part in its combination of lines and colours that eschew the natural spectrum to represent a sunlit window, or the literary interest of Auden's "In Praise of Limestone" depends on its language fusing private sensibility to natural formations.<sup>1</sup>

The aesthetic valuation of fine arts does not occlude these interests since visual and literary interests can serve other purposes.<sup>2</sup> Botanical illustrations and engineering drawings use visually interesting material to make clear the important features of plants or clarify the dynamical relations between parts of constructions. Moreover, the conception of aesthetic value is itself at issue. Even in the eighteenth century, when it was grasped by exercising taste, this faculty appears to have so varied with changes in arrangements for displaying and distributing works<sup>3</sup> that aesthetic evaluation was difficult to distinguish from evaluation of other kinds. Consonantly, contemporary art historians may examine aesthetically valuable works, but art history also gives stature to works for their iconography, context, their psychological depth, what they reveal of the history of production, the psychology of artists, and the pathology of societies – where the latter can go to explain the visual interests of works.

The salience of visual or literary interests points in two directions, one internal to a work and the other external, though not necessarily as an irresolvable bifurcation. Interests are significant as values ascribed by subjects, who learn to discriminate what is important in a work. Such discernment depends on a complex system of

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-41926-0 - Explanation and Value in the Arts

Edited by Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell*

distinctions and economies of preference in which visual or literary interest is not capital, and which affect both the artist and the critic or historian. Artist and critic attend to works only mediately. Among other things, the very practice of discerning interest, of giving significance or value to these qualities, depends on constitutive conventions that make it meaningful to put marks on canvas or to give words a non-pragmatic order. It depends on stories told about works that locate the importance of visual and literary interests. And these practices are social in the further sense that the discernment, location, and construction of interesting objects has value within a social scheme. It carries a social charge, blessing some discriminations with gravity and pillorying others.

These issues of the nature of interests, aesthetic value, and the mode of explanation appropriate for works of art structure this volume.

The first three chapters introduce the themes of explanation and value. Michael Podro examines the density, a presence of the medium of representation, to which explanations of works must give significance. This weight is the value the medium bears for us. Failure to attend to it results in incomplete explanations of paintings, and therefore in inadequate aesthetic evaluations. Walter Biemel and Wayne C. Booth disrupt the purity of aesthetic evaluation in other ways. Biemel proposes that philosophy and its study of value is vital to constructing and understanding works while Booth shows why we must practice an ethical criticism.

To explain these positions in more detail, we can begin with Michael Podro's chapter. In "Fiction and reality in painting," he examines what he calls the density painting. This is the sense that it can do things that other media cannot, which is its visual interest. Painting reconstitutes its subject matter in ways particular to itself. For example, as part of the process of making the subject matter its own, the orgy scene of Hogarth's *Rake's Progress* gives release and relation to the dancer and the rake's clothing. Painting is representational in these cases not because it imitates reality but because it construes its subject matter in particular ways. It is a fiction because of its mode of construal rather than for its difference from any moment of reality. At one level, then, Podro's chapter identifies what the visual interest of paintings consists in by explaining how the medium constitutes or formulates its subject matter.

To explain this sense of fiction Podro raises issues of the relation of subject to medium that makes for the density of painting, and of

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-41926-0 - Explanation and Value in the Arts

Edited by Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Interests, values, and explanations*

representation to design, and considers the resources that painting draws upon just as literature draws on language in general. To explain how representation in paintings is a matter of construction in a medium rather than simple recognition of subject matter he first examines three arguments that regard for the medium is distinct from one for subject matter. One maintains that the medium only serves as a means for bringing viewers to the represented subject. The more fully viewers attend to what is represented, the less they attend to the marks by means of which the depiction succeeds, and vice versa. Podro argues that this claim ignores a distinction between material and medium. Chalk or paint marks are not simply material with given properties but also serve as a medium – a controlled use of material, just as sounds are material that in controlled uses convey meanings in a language. The viewer attends to material, to be sure, but sees it as a medium, and attending to the material as medium does not exclude grasping the represented object.

A second argument for the distinction of material from recognition contends that attending to the material *effaces* perception of the depiction and vice versa. The duck-rabbit figure that can be seen as either but never both exemplifies this distinction. Podro denies that it adequately explains the sense of transformation that occurs in seeing material as depiction: citing the case of *Musique aux Tuileries* he argues that transformations in painting do not always efface recognition of the material, and they are not paradigmatic of representation in general.

A third contrast is between material and subject. Chardin uses a rough paint texture to give a very vivid sense of polished silver, while Rubens uses crumbling chalk to convey shimmering silk. But these contrasts do not argue against the material being a medium; they only remind us that the material may have a role other than and in addition to its role as a medium. Recognition does not exhaust the way we see the medium,<sup>4</sup> and a recognition that crumbly chalk can give us a sense of silk is further cause for marvel or irony.

If the sense of the medium is necessary for depiction, Podro needs to explain its distinctiveness – how paints occasion and determine representations. He does this in terms of *continuities* between object and representation that run through paintings. This subject matter and the consistency of rhythm or texture of marks on canvas are mutually determining. The flow of line and the demands of form mutually affect each other: the subject matter takes on fresh characteristics from being reconstituted in its medium.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-41926-0 - Explanation and Value in the Arts

Edited by Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell*

This representation through reconstitution of subject matter in its medium calls for a distinctive sense of design. Gombrich proposed that depiction was, on the one hand, a matter of representation (ultimately a “fidelity to nature”) and, on the other, a design (composition). The two elements seem to push in opposite directions with the more natural being the less ordered and vice versa.<sup>5</sup> Podro identifies two conditions that Gombrich proposes for order: symmetry and a regularity that is identifiable in or parallel to the surface of the painting. Yet the distinction and alleged opposition does not adequately explain representation. Symmetry is not always incompatible with natural appearances – for example, Monet’s *Poppy Field* uses symmetry to define space, while surface patterns on some Greek vases use the regularity of lines with decreasing intervals to suggest form. Thus symmetry and representation facilitate each other and are distinguishable rather than conflicting objectives – a facilitation that resolves the apparent contrasts by discovering continuities between, say, Monet’s painting of the façade of Rouen Cathedral and drawings by van Eyck.

This interrelation between subject matter and medium promises other conclusions. The consistencies within the picture will make for its coherence, showing what is its point. The use of patterns of paint is appropriate to the subject matter in that Hogarth’s placing of figures in *The Rake’s Progress*, together with the textures and solidities provided by the distribution of materials, signify a moral point. But these conclusions need more than talk of consistency, design, representation, and medium. They need a larger sense of paintings generally and their purpose. For this, Podro proposes, an analogy with language becomes pertinent, and that raises issues of what relates to painting as ordinary language does to literature.

Podro initially suggests that literature in some way represents ordinary uses “as a quotation represents an utterance but does not make it.”<sup>6</sup> This explains two characteristics of literature: the freshness of the meanings constituted by literature when it reconstructs ordinary language, and the salience of language in literature. However, this cannot be the whole story since some literature does not merely represent the use of language; it is a case of language in histories, philosophy, and other narratives. The concerns of these narratives overlap. History and philosophy may include literary language, and novels may rely on descriptions of real situations. The two are not completely separable in terms of engagement or disengagement with real events or of the use of literary devices.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-41926-0 - Explanation and Value in the Arts

Edited by Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Interests, values, and explanations*

One feature of literature seems unavoidable. By contrast with other uses of language, literature calls attention to its use of language. The “distinctive feature of literature is to hold something in the mind with particular sensitivity, with uncommon exactness, and to hold it there in the mind by attention to the language in which it is formulated.”<sup>7</sup> It succeeds by disrupting our habits and leading us to attend to the “verbal texture” of the language. This model suggests that distinguished painting, like literature, may demand a similar complex and sensitive attention, while painting that failed to draw this attention to its formulations would be like non-literary language. And just as literature presupposes other uses of language, so undistinguished representation and depiction may form a background for grasping the significance of distinguished painting.

By this account, the notion of painting is doubly evaluative. It is evaluative in distinguishing activity that is interesting because it is complex, sensitive, and self-reflective from its undistinguished counterpart, and also in attending to particular features rather than others when it “takes the world into itself” – when it makes its material its own. In this sense, painting is a fiction, but it is a very distinctive kind of fiction because it does not so much contrast with reality as incorporate it, structure and reconstitute it, in ways permitted by its medium. It is not like a map or scientific description (in at least one understanding of science) of reality in which two logically independent entities must correspond in signal and consistent respects. Painting, like literature, does not seek to provide such an exact correspondence but instead extracts and reintegrates the features of the world into its own structures.<sup>8</sup>

The evaluation involved in this reintegration, the visual interest these features of a painting have because they reconstitute our experience, is the object of art historical description and explanation. Art historical analysis then already supposes some kind of hierarchy of preferences, of what is significant and what is merely peripheral. The evaluation implicit in this ordering is not the result of aesthetic evaluation even if it can be the basis for it. It is, rather, implicated in the meaningfulness of representations and in the interest works have for viewers. What makes them striking, telling, and worth pursuing, even when they are not successful as aesthetic objects, or when the criteria for the aesthetic evaluation no longer seem as compelling as they were previously, what gives them a stature because they hold our attention to the elements and their composition, is their visual interest.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-41926-0 - Explanation and Value in the Arts

Edited by Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell*

In explaining our interest in works by reference to the complex nature of the medium, Podro's chapter moves beyond the distinction between inert material and meaningful subject matter that has raised and plagued questions about the psychological or epistemological foundation of art historical analysis and, in terms of the ontological status of works of art, structured some recent debate in aesthetics. By arguing that our concern is with the medium – with a pictorial material already in use – he locates the issue on this side of meaningfulness rather than seeks a source for aesthetic qualities out of inert material. He can address questions of the ways in which the medium itself is of interest because of the meanings it generates for its subject matter.<sup>9</sup>

Podro's chapter develops the concern with visual interest by explaining how this value is constituted. Representations are fictions, we might say, in being more than imitations of reality. If they were important as images of reality, they would be significant only for their correspondence to reality, and their nature as images would become redundant. They would not then possess any of the visual interest that makes painting an art, for the mode of their construction would be less interesting than the objects existing independently of all images. By contrast, visual interest addresses the mode of representation itself, the meaningfulness of the practices by which we give significance, value and order to our experience. Representations are fictions because they interpellate order in material that becomes visually interesting to our capacities and concerns.

We may continue this interaction between explanation and value by considering another discipline – literature – to show how the entry of values into explanations is also a step across disciplinary boundaries – in this case that between aesthetic and other values. Recently the rejection of orthodox disciplinary boundaries has been less prevalent in the study of painting than in literature. Perhaps this results from developments in literary theory and critical analysis, which rest on the academic respectability literary criticism has enjoyed. When its needs “overtake” the possibilities of analysis made available in, say, orthodox New Criticism or formalist analysis, it could turn to philosophy with some assurance about its own importance, whereas art appreciation and criticism until recently had to explain themselves. In any case, having considered the role of visual interest in explanations of works, suggesting the importance of analogies with language and of historicity, we may turn to works of literature, to consider their explanation and evaluation, before

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-41926-0 - Explanation and Value in the Arts

Edited by Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Interests, values, and explanations*

returning to the external aspects of visual, literary, and other interests.

In their chapters Walter Biemel and Wayne C. Booth examine the conditions for the interpretation or explanation of works. Biemel's chapter relies on a conception of philosophy that takes historicity seriously and argues that literary understanding requires philosophical interpretation: that literary works invite philosophical questions. If art history too turns to language to explain its practices, and especially to the literary use of language, then this association of literature with philosophy will have implications for art history. In a comparable vein, Booth's work has explored the interaction between literature, subjects, and moral philosophy.

In his chapter, "Franz Kafka: the necessity for a philosophical interpretation of his works," Walter Biemel presents a case study of two of Kafka's stories to show how philosophical conceptions structure works of literature. To be sure, given his long relation to Martin Heidegger, Biemel is relying on particular philosophical conceptions to argue about a particular kind of text, but the implication is that comparable interrelations between elements will structure other kinds of texts.

Biemel seeks a relation between literature and philosophy that does not reduce either to its opposite. A literary work of art relies on an enlivening use of language to generate a world created by its author to be experienced by the reader.<sup>10</sup> Philosophy too concerns itself with the human world "and the problematic of how the constituting function in the relationship between [humanity] and world bears out."<sup>11</sup> Both, then, interpret the world, one attending to human relations and the other to the meaning of "all human relationality." Their concerns are not simply continuous with each other but must interpenetrate in so far as they illustrate and explain the same features. In particular, without a philosophical interpretation the meaningfulness of literary works would escape the reader.

The claim seems unorthodox only if readers have become immured to the presence of philosophy of a particular kind in texts and therefore fail to recognize its role in determining what is significant to literary works. To explain that contribution, Biemel examines two stories by Kafka: "In the Penal Colony" and "The Burrow." He sets aside a usual tendency to see these apparently confusing stories as nothing more than excursions of an author's psychology, preferring to proceed in two steps, first of exegesis, which clarifies the process and the structure of narration, and second of interpretation, which

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-41926-0 - Explanation and Value in the Arts

Edited by Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell*

“deals with the inherent sense of the story.”<sup>12</sup> The first story represents a series of contradictions: the unsuitable uniforms, which mean “home” to the guards, and are an unmistakable sign of homelessness; the message to be imprinted in the victim’s body is indecipherable; and so on. Every function of the mechanical parts of the story runs counter to making sense. This run of contradictions raises issues about meaningfulness. “As a rule we take it for granted that man is a rational animal, but overlook that he is exposed to non-sense and can even be overshadowed by it.”<sup>13</sup> In this instance Kafka signals the manner in which justice turns into injustice and legality breaks free of its anchor in public and due processes, until the “perverted conceptualization of legality must, in the end, annul itself.”<sup>14</sup>

By this account, the story becomes a study of fanaticism, presaging “the awesome, negative fact of our age.” The apparently opaque perceptions that it consists of appear through their exegesis as a set of relationships between the characters, depicting choices and behaviors that, in turn, make sense when, through interpretation, they signify human reality. A relationship between individuals premised on the considerations that drive the prison officer depends on a particular conception of humanity; the result of pursuing that mode of behavior is self-annihilation.

These relationships between literature and philosophy become clearer, Biemel proposes, through the second short story, “The Burrow.” A schematic overview of this story “reveals three parts: (1) the animal’s idea of the burrow, (2) the animal’s leaving the burrow, and (3) the animal’s coming back to the burrow.”<sup>15</sup> These stages articulate “a high degree of sensitivity” toward and need for security, which constantly nullifies the security that the burrow provides. “Along with a striving for security, the enemies, which the burrow is supposed to protect it from, begin to enter its imagination.”<sup>16</sup> Even the stillness that the burrow provides is disrupted by a fear of what could threaten it. Similarly, when it leaves the burrow, its denizen restricts itself to watching over it. And once the animal has returned to its seclusion, a crisis occurs when an almost inaudible whistling wakes it from sleep. Unable to comprehend the sound, the animal loses its peace of mind and is led to destroy the burrow it had produced, in order to control the noise.

Biemel sees a process of self-justification as the theme of this story. The animal is like a human being in that self-justification depends on the agents’ bringing themselves “to realization.” This realization of



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-41926-0 - Explanation and Value in the Arts

Edited by Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Interests, values, and explanations*

the human being is a matter of constantly making choices that determine “the direction of their existence.”<sup>17</sup> Heidegger investigated this procedure through the concept of authenticity: “the fact that individuals must find their very own proper individuality for themselves, or, for that matter, that individuals may also lose it whenever a central choice ill serves *their own possibilities* – their latent abilities, talents and interests – or when it is overshadowed by ideas prevailing in the social group or human milieu with which individuals very often have come to identify themselves.”<sup>18</sup>

This authenticity is most acute at the zenith of life, Biemel argues. Then an agent can no longer excuse its choice by hoping to realize itself at some future time. In the story, the construction of its burrow “is the major act of self-realization,” but it remains unsatisfactory because the animal is tentative about its achievement. There is “an abyss between what has been accomplished . . . and what is being experienced,” suggesting that lacking certain criteria the animal cannot judge the adequacy of its work, and so is pushed into a limitless uncertainty. In the story, which now appears as a problem to be solved by referring the achievement to its experience, the animal is the enemy of its own security and the destroyer of its own construction.

This interpretation calls for a second phase, Biemel proposes, that will penetrate the narrative order, showing its basis in the “Dimension of Contemporary Metaphysics.” He turns to Heidegger for an analysis of this dimension, especially the essay “Die Zeit des Weltbildes,” where he “came closest to determining the nature of our present time.”<sup>19</sup> In this essay Heidegger uses the phrase “preview in representation,” (*vorstellender Vorblick*) which suggests a relation of the material of experience by which subjects *emplace* themselves, giving objects and events a status that, rather than trying to correlate them into some overarching order or under some single explanatory principle derived from a method of analysis of objects, considers them in their particularity. In this context, the “subject” also takes on a distinctive connotation. It is no longer simply a substance underlying experience but an agency: “man struggles for a place allowing him to be that entity which draws a measure on the whole of what is.”<sup>20</sup>

Biemel argues that Kafka’s narration confronts us with this act of emplacing: the animal’s desire to establish an absolutely secure domicile emplaces what exists in the story. This search for security “is not an accidental concept introduced by Kafka, but belongs to our very own times.” The principal issue becomes one of a calculative

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-41926-0 - Explanation and Value in the Arts

Edited by Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell*

use of reason, of a technological thought that focuses primarily on identifying the best means, the determining causes and their manipulation, according to some single principle and method that seeks to be comprehensive but only reduces differences to quantification – to the detriment of other modes of thinking. Among the latter Heidegger includes a creative attention to things that is not simply determined by the security attendant upon following a known procedure. “Man’s hope of finding lasting security by his endeavors to keep almost total control over entities has turned out to be a futile hope not only in the burrow, but also in our times.”<sup>21</sup> The result of giving over to this search for control is that “our terminal sojourn on earth is no longer concerned with true dwelling, but has come to be determined by our incessant search for security, a security which will finish in total insecurity.”<sup>22</sup> Relying on an inappropriate sense of order, any satisfaction we gain will prove illusory and self-destructive.

Without this philosophical understanding of the need for security and its implications, interpretations of Kafka’s story will miscarry, being unable ultimately to make a full and deep sense of its parts. Without implying that Heidegger alone is right or that no other interpretation of Kafka’s story is possible, Biemel reminds us that “the uniqueness of art consists in the fact that it always invites interpretation – as long as we do not find satisfaction merely in forcing entities to be under our control, but keep on looking for what, in art, reveals itself.”<sup>23</sup>

Heidegger articulates issues that seem particularly germane to Kafka. Other approaches may find other meanings in the stories, some more authentic than others, Biemel suggests, but in every case some deep sense of what it means to strive for sense, and the kinds of order it is important to find, will structure our grasp of works. In the complete absence of all meaning the performance of responding to or constructing art becomes vacuous; the presence of meaning invites philosophy of some kind.

While Biemel finds Heidegger an epochal thinker and therefore uses his work to explain Kafka’s stories, Wayne C. Booth emphasizes a somewhat different remit for philosophy. Most recently in his book *The Company We Keep*, he turns to the ethical and philosophical issues present in any reading of novels. In “On relocating ethical criticism” he identifies two “dogmas” that would be hostile to his approach. These claim that artistic worth is independent of ideological, ethical, or political issues, and that where factual analysis reveals such commitments, critics’ appraisal of works cannot depend