

# Making and matching: aesthetic judgement and art historical knowledge<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

Ernst Gombrich once likened the field of art history to Caesar's Gaul, that is: 'divided into three parts inhabited by three different, though not necessarily hostile tribes: the connoisseurs, the critics and the academic art historians.'<sup>2</sup> The reason for this supposed tribalism is that academic art historians often aspire to something other than art appreciation or art criticism; that is to make more significant statements than whether they liked something or not, or whether it was any good.

In this paper, however, it is argued that aesthetic judgement plays a key role in the production of art historical knowledge and that judgements of taste lie at the very heart of art historical practice. This argument is advanced by using three examples of historical accounts of art: Erwin Panofsky on Renaissance art; Svetlana Alpers on Dutch Baroque art and Donald Judd on Colour-Field Expressionism. In each case a different discursive model has been employed to account for a different type of art. In concluding I employ Nelson Goodman's notion of 'matching' taken from *Ways of Worldmaking* to discuss how discursive models are matched to their objects. I then, finally, offer a re-reading of Immanuel Kant's aesthetic judgement to provide a basis for how such 'matching' is done using taste a regulative principle.

The key claim is that in their encounters with art the art historian makes parallel judgements. First, they make critical and connoisseurial judgements, which they may or may not choose to acknowledge. Second, further judgements are made on the particular discursive and historical models that they have chosen to use and match with their objects. My argument is that, even though they might not like to admit it, such discursive judgements are also informed by aesthetic concerns; that is they are regulated by taste. In short, art historians are involved in a process that attempts to reconcile two things: on the one hand a mode of writing and on the other the art which that writing negotiates. Hence; the central argument is that aesthetic judgements play a key role in this negotiation and hence in the genesis and structure of art historical discourse<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Some ideas in this paper are also explored in the introduction to: Francis Halsall, Julia Jansen, Tony O'Connor, (eds.), *Rediscovering Aesthetics*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008. I'm especially grateful to Richard Woodfield and Andrew McNamara for comments on the text. The phrase 'making and matching' comes from Ernst Gombrich's description of art making.

<sup>2</sup> Ernst Gombrich, *The Essential Gombrich*, London: Phaidon, 1996, 6

<sup>3</sup> A similar argument is made in Andrew McNamara, *An Apprehensive Aesthetic: The Legacy of Modernist Culture*, (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009) where McNamara argues for an irresolvable tension (between objectivity and judgement) at the heart of the discipline of art history; but from which its disciplinary rigour emerges. The role of aesthetic judgement in art history is also discussed in Michael Ann Holly, 'Mourning and Method', *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 84, no.4, Dec. 2002, 660-69

## Aesthetics and Kunstwissenschaft

In his 'experiment in art writing', *The Sight of Death* the art historian T.J. Clark reflected upon what it means to translate the personal experience of looking into the public realm of art historical language. The book is a series of diary entries presenting the abstract thoughts, meditations and occasional poems that emerged from a sustained encounter with two paintings by Poussin, *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake* and *Landscape with a Calm* (which, in 2000, were both in the Getty Museum in Los Angeles.) The result is a meandering text in which he describes the conditions under which the image was encountered including the weather and particular effects of light.

The ethos of the book is summed up by Clark's somewhat odd claim that: 'And yes, I do think a good poem about Poussin would be the highest form of criticism.'<sup>4</sup> Clark claims at one point that he is 'flinching from the business of putting these weights and movements into words.'<sup>5</sup> And perhaps one reason for this 'flinching' is how the project runs counter to received art historical method of ensuring epistemological certainties.

It is not until 57 pages in that an art historical fact appears, and then with a caveat: 'The Louvre catalogue says – at last a fact, and first facts are always scandalous – that early on in Rome Poussin caught syphilis and was never properly cured.'<sup>6</sup>

Clark's claim that a poetics of the images would contribute to our knowledge of them seems initially at odds with the art historical tradition of *Kunstwissenschaft*. Clark's project disrupts received notions of art historical scholarship because he is unapologetic in allowing the irruption of aesthetics into the writing of art. However the argument here is that what Clark is doing is what all art historians do; namely a process of *making and matching* in which methods for describing and reconstructing works of art in present contexts are judged to be appropriate to those works.

A genealogical investigation into the foundations of institutional art history reveals that it has a dialectical and very uneasy relationship with aesthetics<sup>7</sup>. Modern art history was systematised in German language art discourse as a scientific method or *Kunstwissenschaft*. In German-language *Kunstwissenschaft*, is distinct from *Kunstgeschichte* (stories or histories of art), the former sharing Positivism's concerns with the possibility of objectivity of statements.

<sup>4</sup> T.J. Clark, *The Sight of Death*, London: Yale University Press, 2006, 53

<sup>5</sup> T.J. Clark, *The Sight of Death*, London: Yale University Press, 2006, 93

<sup>6</sup> T.J. Clark, *The Sight of Death*, London: Yale University Press, 2006, 57

<sup>7</sup> I've argued elsewhere that the relationship between art history and aesthetics is framed by its relationship to modernism. Art history was established in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in a specifically modernist context pitched between scientific, philosophical and aesthetic ambitions. One of the conditions of its modernity was that, whilst there was little academic or intellectual precedent for art history's particular mode of inquiry, it was nonetheless predicated on the attempt to systematize and reconcile discursive accounts with aesthetic objects. See Francis Halsall, 'Strategic Amnesia: Modernism and Art History in Ireland in the Twenty-First Century', *Irish Review*, 39, 2008, 18ff. in which I discuss the development of Art History in Ireland in the context of Modernism. See also, Elizabeth Mansfield, 'Art History and Modernism,' in Elizabeth Mansfield (ed.), *Art History and its Institutions: Foundations of a Discipline*, London: Routledge, 2002, 11-28

Kunstwissenschaft was predicated on the possibility that there can be a study of art which is systematic, scientific and objective. It was, as Richard Woodfield recently observed, 'based on a rejection of academic philosophical aesthetics'<sup>8</sup> and was particularly concerned with the issue of the legitimacy and validity of its judgements. Such aspirations run through the work of the founding fathers of modern art history such as Heinrich Wölfflin, Alois Riegl, Max Dvořák at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the subsequent work of Erwin Panofsky and Ernst Gombrich in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>9</sup> Their shared concern was to distance themselves from a tradition of connoisseurship, from art criticism and the passing of aesthetic judgements on works of art; that is, art history had to have some claim to validity in its judgements—it wasn't merely art criticism, or the passing of aesthetic judgements on works of art. As has been well documented<sup>10</sup>, the emergence of *Kunstwissenschaft* resulted in a formalisation of methods such as Heinrich Wölfflin's attempt at historical objectivity by grounding art historical enquiry in five pairs of formal, visual analysis.

However this concern with validity raises serious questions for the art historian: on what ground do such claims to validity rest? Is there some sense of validity, or *necessity*, which is not founded upon trans-historical or metaphysical givens? What is the legitimacy of the claims that one makes about art? How do we choose one account over another? What makes one way of talking about art more appropriate than another?

If art historical research is involved in the production of art historical knowledge then, as Lyotard has observed, when it comes to judging the legitimacy of that knowledge, there is no higher level 'truth' or structure of meaning to which we can appeal to arbitrate between conflicting accounts.<sup>11</sup>

The rest of this paper, which outlines answers to these questions of legitimacy, is a speculative one. The claim is that, even when we try to avoid it, aesthetic judgement seeps into our reflections on art. But that it does so in a subtle and often unconscious way. This does not mean that we pass judgements on art (which we inevitably do); but rather that the judgment we use to regulate and apply our validity claim about art is an *aesthetic* judgment.

## Narrative and Ekphrasis

At the heart of these questions of validity is the relationship between discourse and the world which that discourse re-describes. The issue is that if history writing is

<sup>8</sup> Richard Woodfield, 'Kunstwissenschaft versus Ästhetik: the Historians' Revolt against Aesthetics,' in Francis Halsall, Julia Jansen, Tony O'Connor, *Rediscovering Aesthetics*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008

<sup>9</sup> For a manifesto see Hans Sedlmayr's 'Toward A Rigorous Study of Art, (1931) in Christopher Wood, (ed.) *The Vienna School Reader*, New York: Zone Books, 2000, 132 ff

<sup>10</sup> Michael Ann Holly, *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984; Donald Preziosi, *The Art of Art History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998; Eric Fernie, *Art History and its Methods*, London: Phaidon, 1995, Paul Crowther, *The Transhistorical Image*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002

<sup>11</sup> See both J.F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, (trans. Bennington & Massumi), Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984 and *The Differend* where Lyotard discusses truth in relation to Holocaust denial.

essentially a literary endeavour then different criteria for its success and failure apply to those of scientific study. Hayden White identified how this has consequences for how the validity of the claims of history writing is maintained not by criteria of truth, but rather *plausibility*:

What appears to be a realistic representation of the facts is always based on a criterion, not of truth, but of plausibility, which has reference to the social practices of the historian's own time, place and circumstances. If (a particular type of bourgeois humanist history) is a science, it is a science of the plausible, the verisimilar... rather than the [True]. But the "Plausible" which is a socially given category is quite different from the "possible" revealed to us by science and the imaginary revealed to us by literature and art.<sup>12</sup>

In relation to art history, the issue raised by White specifically concerns how the relationship between the textual and the visual is mediated and subsequently judged.<sup>13</sup>

The subsuming of the pictorial by the linguistic demonstrates that the art historian is engaged in an activity of ekphrasis, by which they translate pictures into words. The art historian Michael Baxandall has described the uneasy relationship between pictures and the words that describe them in the following terms:

We do not explain pictures: we explain remarks about pictures - or rather we explain pictures only in so far as we have considered them under some verbal description or specification...

Every evolved explanation of a picture includes or implies an elaborate description of that picture. The explanation of the picture then in turn becomes part of the larger description of the picture, a way of describing things about it that would be difficult to describe in another way. But though "description" and "explanation" interpenetrate each other, this should not distract us from the fact that description is the mediating object of explanation. The description consists of words and concepts in a relation with the picture, and this relation is complex and sometimes problematic...

In fact, language is not very well equipped to offer a notation of a particular picture. It is a generalising tool.<sup>14</sup>

One of the things Baxandall draws attention to is something that can often be forgotten in the day to day practice of looking at art. This is that art history, as the study objects predominantly in terms of their visuality, often takes as a given condition of its practice the transparency of its operations. By doing so what is often ignored is the fundamental paradox which lies at the very heart of art historical method - namely the incommensurability between works of art and, in the words of James Elkins, 'the words that fail them.'<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Hayden White, *The Content of the Form*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1987, 93

<sup>13</sup> This has been discussed at length by Keith Moxey in *The Practice of Persuasion: Paradox and Power in Art History*, Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2000

<sup>14</sup> Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention*, Yale: Yale University Press, 1987, 3

<sup>15</sup> James Elkins, *On Pictures and the Words that Fail Them*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998

An ambiguity seems to dwell in the gap between the empirical particularities of an art object and the historical accounts which redescribe it.

For Baxandall this is illustrated by the different ways in which we experience different mediums. A picture on a 2 dimensional surface, for example, is a visual field that is simultaneously available. We experience it in its totality; and then focus our attentions in a non-linear way on details within it. To the detail in the top left corner, for example, and then the middle and then the bottom right. A text on the other hand is read, in western traditions, from left to right and from top to bottom. The page is, in some basic, brute sense, a simultaneously available visual field; but our likely response to this is framed by the typographic and linguistic conventions that serve as the horizon for our expectations.<sup>16</sup>

The very act of writing about images means that there must be some reconciliation between the visual and the textual. Historians of art construct narratives that are used to 'read' objects and events; textually re-describe them; and thus make sense of them. As Barthes claimed, the historian does not merely relate facts and is not engaged in the process of only presenting empirical and documentary evidence. The historian, Barthes argues, is involved in as much a literary as an epistemological endeavor:

The historian is not so much a collector of facts as a collector and relater of signifiers; that is to say, he organizes them with the purpose of establishing positive meaning and filling the vacuum of pure, meaningless series.<sup>17</sup>

The art historian, then, does not re-present facts but rather *re-describes objects*. She does so by placing them in narratives and structures of meaning by which they become intelligible in a contemporary context.

Panofsky argues that this *re-description* is the result of historical research into art that is subsequently configured in such a way as to become meaningful; that is to make *sense*:

Assuming the concept of artistic volition to be methodologically justified, the "necessity" which it, too, determines in a particular historical process consists not in determining a causally dependent relationship between individual phenomena which succeed each other in time but in discovering in them (just as in an artistic phenomenon) a unified sense. The intention is not to justify the course of events genetically, as a progression of so-and-so many

<sup>16</sup> Art Historical interest in this has recently resurfaced in discussions on the concept of Visual Literacy and the application of semiotics to the pictures. WJT Mitchell for example has convincingly argued that visual literacy (a phrase that is used with increasing frequency) is a sloppy metaphor that attempts to collapse the visual into the literary 'Vision is as important as language in mediating social relations, and it is not reducible to language, to the "sign," or to discourse. Pictures want equal rights with language, not to be turned into language. They want neither to be levelled into a "history of images" nor elevated into a "history of art," but to be seen as complex individuals occupying multiple subject positions and identities.' W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005, 47

<sup>17</sup> Roland Barthes, 'The Discourse of History,' (trans. Stephen Bann), *Comparative Criticism*, 3, 1981, 7-20

single happenings, but to undertake to explain the sense of historical meaning as an ideal unity.<sup>18</sup>

Central to these debates is the claim that there is a mismatch between words and pictures. And that our choice of interpretive, textual, and discursive strategies is not given, but flexible. This choice is motivated by an attempt to negotiate this mismatch; or, to somehow bridge this gap between art objects and their re-descriptions. There is a construction at work when visual phenomena are represented in discourse.

### Three Discursive Models Historical Writing on Art

The active choices made in choosing different discursive models can be demonstrated by comparing different accounts. Here I describe three exemplary, but very different, methods to highlight their methodological differences. These are: Erwin Panofsky's, 'Art History as Humanistic Discipline'<sup>19</sup>; Svetlana Alpers' description of 17<sup>th</sup> Century Dutch art as an 'Art of Describing'<sup>20</sup> and Donald Judd's description of Minimalist art.

Panofsky's conception of 'Art History as Humanistic Discipline' method gets its clearest articulation in *Studies in Iconology* (1939). There he outlines the famous tri-partite method of art-historical analysis which is a three level hierarchy of art-historical interpretation in which meaning in an image is re-constructed three-fold:

(i) The pre-iconographic meaning. That is, the basic, phenomenal, subject matter.

(ii) The Iconographic meaning. That is, the subject matter or the meaning of the work of art in terms of what the symbols mean, and what they would have meant to their intended audience.

(iii) The Iconological meaning. This is what we can learn about the values, beliefs and nature of the period and culture that produced the work. This is, in Panofsky's words:

Apprehended by ascertaining those underlying principles which reveal the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion – qualified by one personality and condensed into one work.<sup>21</sup>

This is a very familiar art-historical strategy. Firstly we work out the basic subject matter of the image. Then we work out the symbolic significance of that subject matter. And then we say something about the culture that produced that art.

One example he discusses at length is Bronzino's (Agnolo di Cosimo) *An Allegory with Venus and Cupid*, (oil on wood), probably painted 1540-50, now in the National Gallery in London. It's a typical example of Florentine Mannerist

<sup>18</sup> Erwin Panofsky, *The Concept of Artistic Volition*, (trans. Northcott and Snyder), *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 8, no. 1, 1981, 30 ff.

<sup>19</sup> Erwin Panofsky, 'The history of art as a Humanistic Discipline' in *Meaning in the Visual Arts: Papers in and on Art History*, New York: Doubleday, 1955, 194 ff.

<sup>20</sup> Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984

<sup>21</sup> Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology*, new edition, New York: Harper and Row, 1967

allegorical painting commissioned by Cosimo I de Medici, the ruler of Florence for King Francis 1<sup>st</sup> of France. It shows a classical subject as interpreted by post-medieval Renaissance Humanism, and hence showing the influence of Petrarch's love poetry.

It is an allegory for the dangers and pleasures of love; and the unveiling by truth and time of the dangers of decadent pleasures.

It shows two figures locked in an embrace. A woman and an adolescent figure sporting wings. This motif shows an unsettling combination of an erotic and fondly maternal embrace. They are surrounded by two female figures on the left; a putti on the right, who foreshadows a mutant figure comprised of a female head on a scaly, dragon-like body with clawed feet holding a honeycomb with a poisonous animal in her hands, which are, strangely and unnaturally, changed around so that left and right hands have been swapped over and point in the wrong directions. Above these figures an old man pulls back a curtain.

An analysis of the iconographic schema demonstrates that each of the figures represented has a specific symbolic meaning. The two central figures of Venus & Cupid are associated with symbols of love and luxury such as the doves at their feet, the Myrtle tree behind their heads and the cushion on which Cupid perches. This central pair is surrounded by the twinned figures of pleasure/jest, on the right who has bells on his feet (seen also in Hellenistic art) and Jealousy (envy/despair) on the left represented by the old woman tearing her hair out. On the top right, the figure of Father Time is identified through the wings of time and the hour-glass. The figure of the Harpy hiding behind the Putti on the right is a symbol of Deceit. The iconography recalls Ripa's *Iconologia* where the figure of *Hippocrisia* or *Fraude* is depicted with feet like a wolf, hidden beneath her clothes. The masks at her feet symbolise duplicity as does the sweet honey and poisonous creature she holds in her exchanged hands.

Such detailed iconographic detail is revealed to the art-historian by identifying the historical context of the symbols and thus identifying the meaning that may be interpreted in the image.

Through the machinations of Panofsky's tri-partite analytic method, his conception of 'Art History as Humanistic Discipline' reveals itself. This is a method that approaches the work of art with the assumption that it is a meaningful object that may be subsequently interpreted. As Michael Ann Holly describes:

A work of art is a work of art, and it needs to be appreciated both visually and stylistically; but for Panofsky it is also – and this point is most significant – a historically revealing intellectual document.<sup>22</sup>

However the sophistication of Panofsky's position lies in his acceptance of the impossibility of historical objectivity. His attempt in dealing with this problem of historical neutrality was by accepting the relative perspective of his historical inquiry and then employing a strategy to negotiate this. Trying, in other words, to answer the question as to how the art historian might stop projecting their values

<sup>22</sup> Michael Ann Holly, *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History*, Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1984  
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back onto the past. In the same article Panofsky claims that he was searching for an 'Archimedean Point' to ensure his objectivity. As Michael Ann Holly relates:

[Panofsky] claimed to have been searching, with Riegl as his guide, for an "Archimedean Point" outside the usual web of references in order to describe objectively what he sees as he looks down on individual works. We can picture him as having been transfixed by the crystal ball of art history. He contemplated it intensively until an object suddenly in the glass, demanding interpretation. In its immediate presentation, it was bright and sharp-edged, but it had emerged from the dark and murky waters of history (both formal and contextual) to which he wanted to pay no heed.<sup>23</sup>

This Archimedean Point is an immovable point upon which to fix critical inquiry. It is the fulcrum upon which to pivot critical leverage in such a way so as to stop the projection of contemporary values back onto the past.

In doing so Erwin Panofsky, provides an example of the attempt to bring discourse into some sense in harmony with the object of that discourse. The significance of Panofsky's method lay in his recognition of the problem of relativism and his attempt to deal with it. He did so through engaging with the humanist art of the Renaissance with a method of art historical inquiry that was also humanist. Thus when Panofsky famously claimed that his art history was a Humanist discipline, he was attempting to match the model of inquiry to its object. In short the Humanism implicit in Panofsky's method of art historical reconstruction was a match for the Humanist art that it was reconstructing. Or, an interpretive strategy that looked to reconstruct intelligible meaning in works of art was matched by works that were replete with meaning.

As Michael Podro says of Panofsky:

The crucial point of his argument was that understanding of historically distant art is not simply a matter of confronting it; it involves a process of assimilation and re-interpretation which extends outwards from what is familiar.<sup>24</sup>

This means that, ultimately, the Archimedean Point in Panofsky's account is human rationality in which he has faith that it will be trans-historical. Hence, art which is historically distant to us is, nonetheless, accessible because it can be seen to be participating in the same human rationality which is used to interpret it.

Panofsky's method is the standard art historical mode of inquiry. However it doesn't apply to all types of art. Svetlana Alpers, for example, argues in *Art of Describing* (1983) that Panofsky's method has an Italian bias which seeks to recoup the 'hidden' symbolic or sedimented meanings of artworks. It is thus ineffective in accounting for pictures that were not created within an iconographic or humanist horizon.

<sup>23</sup> Michael Ann Holly, *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History*, Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1984 82

<sup>24</sup> Michael Podro, *The Critical Historians of Art*, Yale: Yale University Press, 1982, 185

Instead, she argues, painters in 17<sup>th</sup> Century Holland, of which Vermeer is exemplary, sought to describe the world, and accurately reproduce a record of its appearances rather than produce a symbolic re-interpretation of it. For Alpers, to read allegorical meanings into this work is to be engaged in an act of art historical misrepresentation. She argues that to seek out iconographic symbols in every part of the image is to practice a type of art history which developed specifically in relation to the rich iconography and style of Italian art.

Dutch Art, she argues, is best understood not as an art of *istoria* (as Alberti would have it)—that is, of narrative—but as an art of describing. Therefore it requires a non-Italianate model of art historical description. Her conception of the 'Art of Describing' means that the visual appearance of the world is re-presented in the picture space. It is, in the words of Gombrich, a 'mirror of nature.'<sup>25</sup> This means that one should look at the image as being similar to the map in the background of the image. The painting is, like the cartographic image, a mapping of visual phenomena. Alpers' argument is, therefore, that the meaning of 17<sup>th</sup> Century Dutch painting lies not in what the pictorial elements symbolise but what they describe.

Alpers' argument is demonstrated when brought to bear on Vermeer's *Allegory of Painting* (1666). In the top right of the map one can read *Descriptio*, suggesting that map makers, like painters, are world describers. Vermeer puts himself in this place by adding his own signature just below the model's head where you can read on the map 'I Vermeer.' The map of Holland and the map of the space of the artist's studio have become conflated. And this is a rational space being mapped here. The perspectival scheme locates the vanishing point in front of figure of Clio thereby directing attention toward her. This is known because there is a pinhole below the black finial of the pole weighting the map where a pin would have been placed to extend strings and trace the lines of the perspective.

For Alpers, then, the picture plane is transparent (in Foucauldian terms it is, like *Las Meninas*; an exemplar of what he calls the classical order of representation.<sup>26</sup>) Thus, whilst every pictorial element might not have a symbolic or iconographic meaning, it does have a depictive and descriptive meaning. Everything in the picture refers to something beyond itself.

Alpers, then, argues that Panofsky's humanist model is simply wrong when applied to northern (non Italian) painting. This follows from her consideration of how the objective conditions of Dutch art differ from those of Italian Renaissance art. However, as is argued below, this argument, and the claims to the discursive validity of the statements that follow from it, is underwritten by tacit judgments on the relative plausibility of the match between the object of inquiry and the chosen discursive model. In short, Alpers has made a judgement on the appropriateness of the Italianate model; found it to be lacking, and hence dismissed its validity as an interpretive method.

In comparison with Panofsky and Alpers the Minimalist sculptor Donald Judd provides yet another critical model; again in response to a different model of

<sup>25</sup> Ernst Gombrich, *The Story of Art*, New York: Phaidon, 1950 Ch. 20

<sup>26</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, Abingdon: Tavistock/ Routledge, 1970, Ch. 1

art<sup>27</sup>. In this case he sees the Colour-Field Abstract Expressionist canvases of Barnett Newman as being devoid of meaning. They are neither replete with iconographic, symbolic meaning nor richly depictive or descriptive. Instead they are blank and opaque pictorial fields.

In his short review of Barnett Newman Judd opens with a deadpan statement of critical judgement: 'Barnett Newman's paintings are some of the best done in the United States.'

He continues by describing the work in their simple objecthood. For example his poker-faced description of the large red canvas *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* is as following:

*Vir Heroicus Sublimis* was done in 1950 and the colour of one stripe was changed in 1951. It's eight feet high and eighteen long. Except for five stripes it's a red near cadmium red medium. From the left, a few feet in, there is an inch stripe of a red close in colour but different in tone; a few further there is an inch of white; across the widest area there is an inch and a half of a dark, slightly maroon brown that looks black in the red; a few feet further there is a stripe like the first one on the left; a foot or so before the right edge there is a dark yellow, almost raw sienna stripe, the colour that was changed. These stripes are described in sequence but of course are seen at once, and with the areas.

He concludes in similarly prosaic fashion: 'Similarly, Newman sometimes leaves brushstrokes along an area, since that is the way the paint was applied. A good deal more could be said about Newman's work, but there isn't space.'<sup>28</sup>

And that is it. Thus in Judd's account both the iconographic search for symbolic meaning and the idea that the picture plane is a description of the world beyond its immediate presentation are replaced by observing the picture plane as a non-transparent object. Judd, instead, views and describes the painting in non-referential objecthood, in almost sculptural terms thus making it comparable to his own Minimalist objects<sup>29</sup>.

Thus far I have presented three models of writing about art. These are:

(i) For Panofsky the work of art is a humanist historical document that participates in the same rationality as the viewer.

(ii) For Alpers the work of art is a description and depiction of the world, viewed through a transparent picture plane.

(iii) For Judd the work of art is opaque picture plane featuring a pattern. The work of art is an object that refers to itself.

<sup>27</sup> Although Judd's observations on Newman might properly fit the category of criticism – in that they are a descriptive response to then contemporary art – they still apply to the discussion on art historical practice because they: (i) represent a discursive model developed in sympathy with a particular mode of art practice and (ii) attend to the historical specificity of that practice.

<sup>28</sup> Donald Judd, 'Barnett Newman' in Francis Francina, Charles Harrison, *Modern and Modernism*, London: Harper & Row, 1982, 129 ff.

<sup>29</sup> For a brilliant discussion of Judd's writing on Newman in context of arguments on The Sublime see Richard Hooker, 'Sublimity as Process', Paul Crowther (ed.), *The Contemporary Sublime; Sensibilities of Transcendence and Shock. Art and Design Profile*, 40, London: Academy Editions, 1995, 43-53

In each account, something of the essence of the art object in question is revealed by the accounts used in its re-presentation and re-description. Each account is a description of the work which reconstructs the work according to the terms specific to its discourse. But in each case the question remains as to how to judge the appropriateness, legitimacy or validity of each account.

### Goodman and discursive 'rightness'

Nelson Goodman provides an explanation of the relationship between discourse and the world it describes in *Ways of Worldmaking*. Goodman's central argument is that there are many, equally valid, ways of describing the phenomenal world. As he claimed (in response to a symposium on his work): 'No firm line can be drawn between world-features that are discourse-dependent and those that are not.'<sup>30</sup>

There are two key philosophical co-ordinates for Goodman's thinking: first, the issue of how cultural and psychological factors might frame and thus influence perception; and second (as with the late Wittgenstein) the claim that no distinction can be drawn between a character of experience and the description of that experience given by the subject.<sup>31</sup>

In *Ways of Worldmaking* Nelson Goodman provides an account of this process of making and matching that goes on between different symbolic systems; all of which serve as systems of providing meaning about the world. As a strict nominalist Goodman rejects transcendent truth as a criterion of the success of a system of worldmaking. This is because truth can be different and even conflicting in different worlds.

With all this freedom to divide and combine, emphasize, order, delete, fill in and fill out, and even distort, what are the objectives and the constraints? What are the criteria of success in making a world?... Nevertheless, showing or exemplifying, like denoting, is a referential function; and much the same considerations count for pictures as for the concepts or predicates of a theory; their relevance and their revelations, their force and their fit – in sum their rightness. Rather than speak of pictures as true or false we might better speak of theories as right or wrong; for the truth of the laws of a theory is but one special feature and is often, as we have seen, overridden in importance by the cogency and compactness and comprehensiveness, the informativeness and organizing power of the whole system.<sup>32</sup>

Crucially Goodman sees both art and critical writing as comparable; they are different forms of worldmaking. That is, both are nominal and conventional systems by which the world is observed, made and remade. Neither of which can be judged by virtue of their truth. Instead they are judged by their 'rightness'; that is, by their fit with the world.

<sup>30</sup> Nelson Goodman, 'On Starmaking' *Synthese*, Volume 45, Number 2, Oct., 1980, 211-15

<sup>31</sup> Hilary Putnam, 'Reflections on Goodman's Ways of Worldmaking' *Journal of Philosophy*, 76, 11, 1979, 603-618.

<sup>32</sup> Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978, 17, 19

Briefly, then, truth of statements and rightness of descriptions, representations, exemplifications, expressions – of design, drawing diction, rhythm – is primarily a matter of fit: fit to what is referred to in one way or another, or to other renderings, or to modes and manners of organization. The differences between fitting a version to a world, a world to a version, and a version together or to other versions face when the role of versions in making the worlds they fit is recognized. And knowing or understanding is seen as ranging beyond the acquiring of true beliefs to the discovering and devising of fit of all sorts.<sup>33</sup>

Goodman's argument here is that the success or failure of a system of describing (and also depicting) the world should be judged by the criteria of 'fit.' By fit he means a satisfactory meshing between the system that observes and recognises the world (as a process of re-cognition) and the world itself. This meshing should be judged by the 'rightness' of that fit.

As is concluded in the following section, this judgement of 'fit' is compatible with aesthetic judgement. This is to say that there is an aesthetic judgement at work in this understanding of the 'rightness' of the 'fit' between a way of worldmaking and the world. In other words, we might judge a description of a work of art – just like a work of art itself – by how satisfactory or even how pleasing the 'fit' is between its structural composition and the world that it describes. Does it feel right?

Goodman himself hinted at the role of aesthetic feeling in framing this judgement on the appropriateness of descriptive systems: In a later commentary on *Ways of Worldmaking* he stated:

Far from wanting to desensitize aesthetic experience, I want to sensitize cognition. In art – and I think in science too – emotion and cognition are interdependent: feeling without understanding is blind, and understanding without feeling is empty.<sup>34</sup>

In bringing this back to the overall argument the conclusion is that such 'fit' and 'Rightness' can also be used to understand the desire to bring works of art and their subsequent interpretations into some sort of harmony.

In other words, there may be structural affinities between a work of art and its subsequent account – and these structural affinities may be revealed by the exercise of judgement. The argument, then, is that aesthetic sensibility informs decisions made in choosing discursive models. Thus, I argue, it is *aesthetic* judgement that is at work when interpretive models are chosen or rejected in the attempt to reconcile a mode of writing and the art which that writing negotiates.

<sup>33</sup> Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978, 138

<sup>34</sup> Nelson Goodman, 'Replies', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 39, no. 3, Spring 1981, 273-280

### 'Matching' as an aesthetic judgement

Goodman's rightness of fit seems to imply that it can be judged according to how satisfying the fit is. An account of such satisfaction resonates strongly with Kant's account of aesthetic judgements, or judgements of taste in which, Kant argues, we use pleasure as a regulating principle. We, Kant says: 'use imagination (perhaps in connection with understanding) to refer the presentation to the subject and his feeling of displeasure.'<sup>35</sup> The recourse to pleasure rather than truth and the argument that the claims to validity made by art history are not subject to epistemological proofs calls the validity of those claims into question. A poem is no more or less 'true' in its account of Poussin than a Marxist reading; and similarly whilst there may be many conflicting accounts of Jackson Pollock's paintings (Marxist, Formalist, Feminist, Psychoanalytic) it is often the case that the accounts are not contradicted by the paintings themselves.

However the claims of art history are made with a view to being valid in so far as they are plausible; and hence communicable to a general audience. This, arguably, matches the problem identified by Kant in the antinomy of taste:

(1) Thesis: A judgement of taste is not based on concepts; for otherwise one could dispute about it (decide by means of proofs).

(2) Antithesis: A Judgement of taste is based on concepts; for otherwise, regardless of the variation among [such judgements], one could not even so much as quarrel about them (lay claim to other people's necessary assent to one's judgement).<sup>36</sup>

Kant's famous solution to the antinomy is that:

A judgement of taste must refer to some concept or other, for otherwise it could not possibly lay claim to necessary validity for everyone. And yet it must not be provable from a concept, because while some concepts can be determined, others cannot, but are intrinsically both indeterminate and indeterminable.<sup>37</sup>

Kant asserts that our judgements of taste cannot be governed by rules. We are, instead, free and autonomous in our making judgements of taste. This also applies to our statements about art because there can be no determining (*bestimmend*) concept under which to subsume what Panofsky calls the 'confusing and unfathomable chaos of objects and events.'<sup>38</sup> When we make an aesthetic judgement we do so using the object as an exemplar of that which has been judged. Likewise we cannot claim an empirical or ethical necessity in the choice of our statements, but rather we can demonstrate some strategies are more exemplary than others. In other words, as demonstrated in the example of the multiple art historical strategies that I've presented, one account is not more 'right' or 'true' than another. There is not

<sup>35</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, (trans. Werner Pluhar), Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1987, 44

<sup>36</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 211

<sup>37</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 212

<sup>38</sup> Erwin Panofsky, *The Concept of Artistic Volition*, (trans. Northcott and Snyder), *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 8, no. 1, 1981, 30 ff

necessarily a single analytic strategy that definitively applies to all art. However, what we might say is that some statements are more appropriate to the art in question in a manner that is not determined in so far as there are no rules by which the appropriateness of this match can be judged. Instead a negotiation between statements and object is entered into, in which examples are produced and in which a free-play of making and matching between examples and objects takes place.

In the first moment of the *Critique of Judgment* Kant argues for the disinterestedness of judgments of taste. He states that the satisfaction associated with a judgement of taste is disinterested and that: 'The liking that determines a judgement of taste is devoid of all interest.'<sup>39</sup> Correspondingly, when we judge the match between a statement and its object we also: 'In order to play the judge in matters of taste, we must not be in the least biased in favour of the thing's existence but must be wholly indifferent about it.'<sup>40</sup>

The problems with Kant's claims for the disinterestedness of aesthetic judgements are multiple and well known and they won't be unpacked further here. However it is noted that (as he repeats in the third moment) it is because there is no interest or 'purpose' in the judgment that it is free from determining a-priori concepts. In other words there are no rules by which our judgements of taste are regulated. There is no 'purpose' in our making the statement match its object over and above the pleasure that is derived from the match. And, likewise, there is no singular reason as to why any art historical strategy is more truthful than another.

In the third moment Kant argues for the subjective purposiveness of judgements of taste. Subjective purposiveness gives us a model for how a 'match' is synthesised between statements and their objects. Importantly there can be no empirical or objective concept, such as truth, that regulates the validity of the statements. Instead a subjective purposiveness is at work:

What is formal in the presentation of a thing, the harmony of its manifold to [form] a unity (where it is indeterminate what this unity is [meant] to be) does not by itself reveal any objective purposiveness whatsoever. For here we abstract from what this unity is *as a purpose* (what the thing is [meant] to be) so that nothing remains but the subjective purposiveness of the presentations in the mind of the beholder. Subjective purposiveness [is] merely a certain purposiveness of the subject's presentational state and, within that state, [an] appealingness [involved] in apprehending a given form by the imagination. Such purposiveness does not indicate any perfection of any object whatever, [since] no object is being thought through any concept of a purpose.<sup>41</sup>

In short, like something beautiful for Kant, we probably can't explain exactly why some statements are appropriate; but we make them in the faith of their communicability through appeal to an audience that we believe will agree with them.

<sup>39</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 45

<sup>40</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 46

<sup>41</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 74

In the second moment of the *Critique of Judgment* Kant argues for the universality of judgements of taste. Such judgements are made in the spirit of universality, yet are subjective and not bound by either particular rules or other people's opinions. An aesthetic judgement is singular and autonomous, but it appeals to the universal. This does not mean, however, that we should expect everyone to agree with us but rather that it recognises that everyone is capable of participating in the act of judging and of making such judgments. Hence, we recognise that the capacity for making judgments is universal even if there is not a common or uniform audience for them.

It is this appeal to a universal audience that provides an impetus for the plausibility of our claims. When we judge a particular discursive strategy to be a more appropriate one, we make a subjective judgement that has not been regulated by an *a priori* or determining concept. We do so, however, in the spirit that our judgement can be shared by an audience of our peers. For example, when Alpers claims that Panofsky's humanist model is inappropriate for Dutch Baroque art, she is making a claim that her method is a better match and therefore a more plausible account. But it is not that the technique is more plausible to her alone but she needs to assume that a community of art historians should also find it more plausible. She makes, in other words, a subjective judgement that appeals to a general audience.

The link that Kant makes in the second moment between the subjective and the inter-subjective is revisited in the fourth moment Kant where defends the 'necessity' of aesthetic judgements. As Kant says at the outset, in *The Critique of Judgment* he will show how judgement *in general* operates by showing how aesthetic judgment *in particular* operates. He does this by revisiting argument concerning the communicability of judgement that he had developed in the 1<sup>st</sup> critique.

In *The Critique of Pure Reason* Kant argues that judgements of cognition in order to be valid *and hence communicable*, must be in agreement with the object:

Persuasion is a mere illusion, for the judgement's basis, which lies in the subject, is regarded as objective. Hence such a judgement also has only private validity, and the assent cannot be communicated. Truth, however, rests on agreement with the object; consequently, in regard to the object the judgment of every understanding must be in agreement... Thus, whether assent is conviction or mere persuasion, its touchstone externally is the possibility of communicating the assent and of finding it to be valid for every human being's reason.<sup>42</sup>

As Wenzel observes:

Although judgements of taste are not judgements of cognition, Kant makes use of the notion of communicability in the third Critique as a certain 'touchstone' so that we may find the right kind of grounds for satisfaction in the beautiful.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, (trans. Werner Pluhar), Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1987, 748

<sup>43</sup> Christian Wenzel, *An Introduction to Kant's Aesthetics*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005, 49

Thus, similar and parallel structures are in place in (i) cognitive judgments where validity is sought and (ii) aesthetic judgements. In both we look for agreement with the object. However, in aesthetic judgements we do so without a determining concept under which that judgement can be subsumed. And this is because aesthetic judgements are predicated on the free (and not rule-bound) play of the understanding and the imagination (the powers of representation.) Kantian aesthetics thus shows how our judgement and claims about art are established, negotiated and justified in a manner that doesn't require recourse to fixed criteria of validity.

Kant tackles the antinomy of taste by invoking what he calls the, 'supersensible substrate of humanity' an indeterminate idea which he claims 'we can do no more than point to.'<sup>44</sup> Thus judgments are made through putting 'ourselves in the position of everyone else'<sup>45</sup> and through appealing to a *sensus communis*. This *sensus communis* (or shared sense) is predicated on the assumption that sensation is, in general communicable, which in turn allows us, to assume (at least in principle) that our judgments are intersubjective and not merely private. We can sense something and hence can assume that others will do so too. For this reason we make a claim to everyone's assent, even though we can't prove the transcendent truth of our judgments.

Yet, crucially, our judgments need not get universal assent; and there is no way of demanding or enforcing such a consensus. Other people are always free to disagree with or dismiss our claims depending plausibility; or how well they think they 'match.'

## Conclusion

I have argued that in choosing to bring forth what Goodman calls a 'match' between art objects and the judgments and statements we make about those objects, we make further judgements on how right those matches feel. The judgements are regulated by taste; and hence aesthetic judgement plays a significant regulatory role in how discursive formations about art are structured. To accept that it is aesthetic judgement that regulates how plausible statements about art are is perhaps a troubling one. It implies that there is, ultimately, a non-rational basis to discourse unlike our empirical or moral judgements.

There are 2 further implications of this position.

First, this provides another impetus for the now well rehearsed critiques of discourse as being ideologically grounded and thus open to critical re-assessment. In this case such an argument would argue that any account that rests on Kant's claims for the disinterestedness and universality of pure judgements of taste is itself compromised by the impossibility of such universality.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 214

<sup>45</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 160

<sup>46</sup> See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, (trans. by Richard Nice) London: Routledge, 1984 and Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1990

Second the discussion need not be limited simply to beauty as it is commonly understood. The use of the term beautiful that necessarily follows from employing Kant's model of aesthetic judgement does not necessarily mean (i) that we can only analyse beautiful objects (this is clearly not the case); or (ii) that we only choose to work with theories that are beautiful. It is rather that the relationship between the object and our statements is judged by us in a way that is explained by Kant's account of aesthetic judgement as subjective yet appealing to a community; and as not determined by a-priori concepts.

To call this relationship or 'match' between our statements and our objects beautiful certainly sounds strange. However, it does explain how our statements on art are mediated and experienced in subtle and often unconscious ways – which perhaps explains why we don't have a vocabulary to describe such matches, and hence why to call it beautiful seems counter-intuitive. However, it may be that the apparatus of aesthetic judgement is the most appropriate one in judging the relationship between those things we look at and the words we use to describe that looking; and that our statements about art are as elusive as the works of art themselves.

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