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Intention and Interpretation

Megan Iverson

Art makes an ambiguous statement. Anyone who has ever visited an art museum, read a poem, or listened to an orchestra knows that the meaning of a work of art is not usually fully apparent at first glance. One of the major arguments between aestheticians pertains to how this meaning should be determined. Laypersons tend to think that what is “in” an artwork is what the artist put there; in other words, the meaning of a work of art is what the artist meant it to mean. This is the position that E.D. Hirsch, Jr. defends in his *Validity in Interpretation* from 1967, who came to be known as the main proponent of intentionalism; that is, the artist’s intention *is* the meaning of a work of art. The opposite position, which is often called anti-intentionalism, was developed in 1946, when William K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley published “The Intentional Fallacy” in the *Swanee Review*. In it, they not only reject the notion that the author puts the meaning ‘into’ the work of art, they say that the artist’s intention in doing the artwork is completely irrelevant. These two polarities of meaning are still being debated furiously today.

In this paper I am going to argue that both the intentionalist and anti-intentionalist positions are too strong and propose reasons why one should except a more moderate position. First, let us examine a few ideas about art itself. In this paper, I will assume that the interpretation of art does not involve an ontological question about the ‘being’ of a work of art, but is rather a question about how we should select an interpretation of that artwork out of the many ways the artwork *could* be interpreted. I

assume this because art does not have a nature outside of humans; that is, humans decide what the nature of art should be. In this case, the question is not about the essence of the meaning of art but rather about the best way to interpret a work of art. As we will see, the 'best way' to interpret a work of art varies according to the philosophical position of the interpreter, but it must at least be capable of rejecting interpretations that are obviously incompatible with the content and form of a work⁶. Furthermore, it may be possible that some works of art allow several interpretations.

The Intentional Argument

Intentionalists put forward the idea that the artist is the sovereign decider of the meaning of a work of art. The critical activities of the intentionalist involve reading biographical information and journal entries about an artist in order to determine what, considering his life, might have caused him to create each particular work. From there, they determine their interpretation of the work. In other words, the cause or intention of the work is also the meaning of the work.

Most arguments supporting intentionalism are negative, reasoning that if the author does not determine the meaning of a work of art, then

⁶ The interpretational styles described in this paper are to be distinguished from 'experience-as' type interpretations. This type of interpretation is completely subjective and does not involve statements that can be found 'true' or 'false' or even 'plausible' or 'implausible.' It is very difficult to argue for the strength or weakness of this particular type of argument. One assumes that when one says "this painting causes me to feel X," he is telling the truth, but either way this method of interpretation is not

there is no one who can objectively decide what the meaning of a work of art is. This stance traditionally allows only one meaning per work of art; however, later theorists have found ways to add (perhaps trivially) a plurality of meanings. Hirsch originally put the argument for the necessity of the intention of the author as follows:

- (1) If a text does not have one and only one unchangeable meaning then it does not really have a meaning (Hirsch 45-46).
- (2) The only way to have one meaning in a work of art is to allow the determining will of the author to choose it (Hirsch 46-47).
Therefore:
- (3) “To banish the original author as the determiner of meaning [is] to reject the only compelling normative principle that could lend validity to an interpretation... For if the meaning of a text is not the author’s, then no interpretation can possibly correspond to *the* meaning of the text...” (Hirsch 5).

Since I will later explore the anti-intentionalist position, which takes issue with the premise that the artist is the only person who can determine the meaning, let us examine premise one for now. Several things, such as the individual words of a language, retain meaning even when they have a multiplicity of meanings (e.g., ‘bark’ can simultaneously mean two things). Therefore, it appears as though Hirsch is calling upon some ontological characteristic that pertains only to meaning in art rather than a universally valid statement about meaning in general⁷. Insofar as a statement is not universally valid, one must look at

especially interesting on a public level, either philosophically or critically.

⁷ It is also possible to make this a linguistic question, as Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels do. They claim that there is no such thing as an intentionless meaning. In other words, the artist’s intention is the same as the meaning of the work. They state that it is impossible to argue

particulars in order to claim their validity. For example, the statement 'If a stop sign does not have one and only one unchangeable meaning then it does not really have a meaning' is true. When we examine the nature of a stop sign, we see that if we gave it another meaning in addition to the command 'stop,' it would no longer function in its present manner but rather would be useless. We can see this as we imagine approaching a busy intersection with a stop sign that has multiple meanings. It is not much use to us to have the stop sign there if it does not uniquely mean 'stop'. However, this does not hold true for a work of art. We can simultaneously understand and hold two different meanings for one work of art. For example, it is meaningful to say that the book *Don Quixote de la Mancha* is simultaneously a parody of the form of the popular chivalry novels of the time *and* an attack against neo-Platonism without having either meaning suffer. Therefore, we must reject premise one.

The rejection of Hirsch's first premise means that a work of art may actually have more meanings than just the artist's intention. The argument cannot therefore conclude that art has an objective, final meaning, or even that there can only be one meaning. This leaves the artwork open to interpretations beyond the artist's own⁸.

Other interpretationalists have attempted to revise Hirsch's argument so that it does not resort to the ontology of art. They try to save intentionalism with a more charitable interpretation (in spite of the

whether or not we should interpret an artwork using the artist's intention, because there is no other physically possible alternative. Since their argument basically involved restating this thesis several times without any explanation, I will not elaborate here.

ironies this might create). For example, Gary Iseminger (1996) added the following passage to Hirsch's argument:

If exactly one of two contradictory interpretive statements about a poem, each of which is compatible with the artwork, is true, then the true one is the one that applies to the meaning intended by the author (Iseminger 319).

This interpretation seems to allow Iseminger to reject the impossibility of more than one meaning, while still giving the artist a position of power over interpretation. This addition to the intentionalist argument also has the benefit of rejecting the author's intention if it does not accord with the artwork (that is, if the artist did not succeed in depicting his intention), which is lacking from Hirsch's original argument. However, as we shall see, this addition does not meaningfully expand the interpretational possibilities.

At first glance, the phrasing of this addition appears incorrect. For when presented with two contradictory interpretive statements about a work of art, one does not usually assume that there are only two options. For example, the statements "the mood of this symphony is somber" and "the mood of this symphony is cheerful" do not exhaust the interpretive possibilities. The statements "the mood is nostalgic" would also be possible. Each of these seems to preclude the other. However, this kind of contradiction is not what Iseminger (1992) has in mind when he writes 'contradictory'. Rather, for him 'contradictory statements' means constructed logical contradictions, formulated as $P \ \& \ \sim P$, which in our example would translate to "the mood of this symphony is somber" and

⁸ This goes beyond the fact that Hirsch admits that an artist can *intend* to

“the mood of this symphony is not somber.” If both of these interpretations are consistent with the symphony, then the deciding factor would be the author’s decision. This does not render the interpretation style inclusive as it might seem, however. By using this technique, it is possible to set up all interpretational claims that could ever be made about this symphony into statements of logical contradiction. (E.g., ‘this symphony represents a Bacchanal,’ ‘this symphony does not represent a Bacchanal,’ ‘this symphony expresses loss,’ ‘this symphony does not express loss,’ etc.) Then, one could systematically remove all of the statements that did not accord with the symphony. With the remaining dichotomies, one would then systematically remove all that were not the intention of the author. The interpretation that would remain would be, in large part, the author’s intention (unless it was not consistent with the work), with a few other minor details that the author did not intend, nor did he intend the opposite. Therefore, in practice this interpretation is not much different from that of Hirsch. Therefore, we can see that Iseminger’s effort to revise Hirsch’s argument is not meaningfully different.

In his paper “Art, Intention, and Conversation,” Noël Carroll takes a different approach to intentionalism. His attempt to correct intentionalism involves examining our intuitive reactions to works of art. He correlates contemplating a work of art to engaging in a conversation; it is not satisfactory to leave the conversation/ work of art without understanding what your interlocutor meant. Therefore, he reasons, the artist’s intention is the correct interpretation. However, he goes on to say that it is possible

have ambiguous or multiple meanings (Hirsch 230).

to infer the authorial intention from the artwork itself (Carroll 101). In this case, it is not clear how his point of view is different from that of the anti-intentionalists, who feel that the work of art is sovereign. Wimsatt and Beardsley themselves affirm that if the intention of the artist is 'in' the work of art, then that is the meaning that will be extracted from it. Furthermore, it is counterintuitive to suppose that observing and analyzing a work of art is the same as participating in a conversation. In a conversation, the intentions are all that matter; the particular word-choice or word-sequence is forgotten instantly. With a work of art, on the other hand, the process of interpreting, explaining, understanding, or evaluating is part of the experience. To say that we go into a conversation and a museum expecting to emerge with the same information is grossly underestimating the content of a work of art (and perhaps the content of a conversation as well). The difference between expressing oneself in a conversation and in artwork is of a different quality, since art involves certain non-linguistic and perhaps ineffable modes of expression. Therefore, Carroll's intentionalist argument also fails.

Although with revision, the intentionalist position may appear more palatable, several problems are inherent to the position. First, most of these arguments assume that the only way to solve a dispute between two interpretations is to use the artist's interpretation, automatically inferring that the artist is the best equipped to figure out the meaning. This is a flawed assumption for several reasons. Most artists are not trained as critics nor are they accustomed to interpreting art. Furthermore, since interpretation is linguistic, the artists not involved with literary medium(s) may be especially out of their element since they might not be

as skilled at writing as critics, authors, and poets are. Finally an artist interpreting her own work is so involved with what she thinks she did that she might not notice what she actually did do.

There are also multiple ways of solving a conflict between two interpretations; for example, one might choose the interpretation that is more interesting, more coherent, more firmly supported by the text, or that leads to more interesting conclusions rather than choosing the meaning the author had in mind. Additionally, there always remains the possibility that two interpretations could be simultaneously used to create layers of meaning or ambiguity. We must also assume that the artist realized when she created the artwork that it would be interpreted, and not always in the manner that she had originally intended. She chose to sculpt, knowing that her intention would not come across as clearly as it would have had she written an academic essay, and therefore was perhaps not quite as interested in communicating a determinate meaning than she was with creating something that *could* be interpreted. Furthermore, when an intentionalist asks a living artist what he meant when he painted a certain flourish in his artwork, if the critic receives a straightforward answer, then her job is done. For it appears that the important part of art for the intentionalist critic is the statement that the artist was trying to make. The actual work of art becomes secondary to the intention of the artist, and this seems to be an unfruitful way to approach an art object: to stop contemplation of it once one 'understands' (has an interpretation of) it. Finally, if there is a dispute between critics over what the artist intended, which is entirely possible and probably the norm, then rather than arguing based on the text, two intentionalist critics

will have to argue based on biological information about the artist. This method may be no more determinate than a textual interpretation, but it is less interesting. Therefore, we must reject intentionalism as an acceptable method for the interpretation of art.

The Anti-Intentional Argument

The anti-intentional critic, when interpreting a work of art, tries to contemplate it as free from outside influences as possible. The anti-intentionalist will concentrate on the formal qualities of the artwork and will discuss the subjects within the artwork as they relate to the rest of the subjects therein. Facts about the artist's life play no part in his interpretation, because even if he knew the artist's intention in sculpting a particular statue, this would give him no information about the meaning of the statue.

Wimsatt and Beardsley, the original defenders of the anti-intentionalist position, argue that the intentionalist position is wrong, and therefore anti-intentionalism must be right. They support their thesis by attempting to destroy the thesis of their antagonists, and so do not have any formal arguments. Their thesis is that it is the public at the historical moment of the artwork's release, not critics or the artist, who decide what an artwork means, and that the critic should study only the formal qualities and cultural references in a painting in order to interpret it. It is not clear how Wimsatt and Beardsley define the relationship between the public that decides what the artwork means and the scholarship that leads one to analyze its formal qualities, since they specify that it is scholars,

and not the public, who do the critical work.⁹ Their arguments against intentionalism are as follows:

- (1) Although a particular piece of artwork was made by someone that intended something by making it, this, in itself, does not lead to a normative statement about how we should interpret it.
- (2) The meaning that we extract should support the work. If the artist's intention is the meaning that is extracted, then that means that the artist was successful in portraying his intention. If not, then we do not want to say that the artwork means what the artist unsuccessfully attempted to depict in his work. "Judging a poem is like judging a pudding or a machine. One demands that it work. It is only because an artifact works that we infer the intention of an artificer." (Wimsatt & Beardsley 348)
- (3) The sentiments expressed in a poem should be attributed to the dramatic speaker and not necessarily to the author.

These statements, especially the second one, seem to indicate that every viewer will extract the same meaning from a given work of art, and thus 'it works'. Primarily, however, the problem with these statements is that there is no criteria that gives us guidance as to which, of the many interpretations that 'work', we should choose as *the* meaning(s). Therefore, although anti-intentionalism is an improvement over intentionalism because it does not attribute the meaning of an artwork to the intention of the artist, it gives no conditions for us to choose between better or worse interpretations.

⁹ This claim seems counter-intuitive. For the public takes many of its meaning clues based on the expertise of critics. One can see a very vivid example of this when one goes to an art museum. There, many members of the public walk around the museum, glance at the painting or the sculpture, study the description of the artwork on the placard underneath for two or three minutes, and then move on to the next painting.

Perhaps it is this lack of guidance that caused Nan Stalnacker to write “the artwork is interpreted in the way one sees shapes in a cloud or suggestions in a Rorschach blot” (Stalnacker 125). She seems to be equating anti-intentionalism to subjectivism or ‘experience-as’ critical techniques, but is important to distinguish subjectivism from anti-intentionalism. Wimsatt and Beardsley described their technique of criticism as more objective than intentionalism. This is because every fact about a painting comes directly from the painting and not some biographical information that may or may not have influenced the author’s intention in creating her artwork. However, it does seem difficult to interpret the meaning of an artwork based solely on its formal qualities, and the theory as a whole seems to ignore the problem of multiple interpretations. Finally, although anti-intentionalism is more objective than attempts to psychoanalyze long-deceased artists, certain biographical facts about the artist or characters in a work of art often enhance its meaning, creating several levels of signification¹⁰.

Moderate Positions

Nan Stalnacker attempts to strike a middle ground between pure intentionalism and the rejection of the author. She disagrees with

¹⁰ For example, in Raphael’s *School of Athens*, we do not need Raphael to tell us that the painting is depicting many ancient Greek philosophers in an example of classical architecture. However, armed with the additional knowledge that the models for many of the philosophers in the painting are great Renaissance painters, including Raphael himself, and knowing that the artists of this time considered themselves to be a part of the re-birth of classical antiquity, our sense of meaning in the painting is enhanced. (This is not to say that this was Raphael’s intention.)

Hirsch's claim that it is the artist's conscious intention that creates a certain meaning in a work of art, but agrees that scholarship about the author is also necessary. She also criticizes Wimsatt and Beardsley for their apparent lack of objectivity, but agrees that it is the formal arrangement of a work of art that is of primary importance. Therefore, instead of art deriving its meaning from the artist's intention, she simply maintains that the meaning must be something that the artist *could* have meant. In other words, someone can interpret the work of art freely, but it is only a credible interpretation if it coheres to what is known about the artist. This seems reasonable, but she goes on to note that the interpretation has to be "[the artist's] intentions as she would have described them if she had had suitable semantic conventions available, sufficient historical perspective on her work, and ability to articulate her work's meaning" (Stalnacker 128). It is unclear why she wants to put the words into the artist's mouth ("as she would have described them"), for if the artist possessed all of these characteristics, she would be just like the critic. In other words, an acceptable interpretation is one that, if the artist were the critic that is doing the interpretation, then the artist could come to the same conclusion that the critic did. This statement is more than just a trivial problem, for just as the intentionalist supported his conclusion by saying 'this is what the artist meant, and therefore it is the meaning,' she supports hers by saying 'this is what the artist *would have* meant, and therefore it is the meaning.' This simply causes the same problem as before, which is that although the artist intended a certain thing when he wrote the sonata, this does not mean that we must judge it based upon that intention. The caveat that the interpretation *could* have been the

intention of the artist does prevent anachronistic problems, or interpretations that the artist would obviously oppose. However, it is not especially interesting in and of itself, nor does it do much to restrict the possible interpretations (it only rejects a small percentage of incompatible interpretations).

Annette Barnes provides a more sophisticated argument that offers rules to choose between interpretations. Barnes defines a *true* interpretation of an artwork (much as Iseminger does) as one in which either (1) the interpretation is supported by the “interpretive mythology”¹¹ of the work or (2) the work is supported by successfully executed artistic intent (‘successful intent’ meaning that the author means to give a work of art a certain feature and does in fact give it that feature). However, according to Barnes’ view, there can be valid or plausible interpretations without a *true* one, there can be valid or plausible interpretations when there *is* a true one, and there can even be valid or plausible interpretations when they conflict with the true one. (It is possible to accept two mutually exclusive readings if one words them, not as P&~P are true, but rather as P is plausible and not-P is plausible.) Therefore, although an artist meant to say one thing and may actually do it, her painting can mean still more. As T.S. Eliot said:

One is quite aware that one’s knowledge of the meaning even of what oneself has written is extremely limited, and that its meaning to others, at least so far as there is some consensus of interpretations among persons apparently qualified to interpret, is

¹¹ An interpretive mythology is the background beliefs that the artist had while creating his work. For example, if the work dealt with Christian themes, then the Bible and Christianity would be the appropriate interpretive mythology to use in order to analyze the symbolism.

quite as much a part of it as what it means to oneself. (Qtd. in Barnes 57)

Interpretations that are not true may, at times, be better than those that are. For example, although Hirsch rejects choosing in this manner, Barnes found that in practice critics prefer interpretations that make the most sense or those that are the most fruitful for further interpretation to those that are *true* (58, 60).

Contrary to Hirsch's view about interpretations that do not rest on authorial intent, Barnes' view makes it possible to reject statements of interpretation without referring back to the author. (This will lead to a plurality of interpretations.) Instead, her view systematically rejects far-fetched interpretations by creating the option that (1) if the statement is a claim of plausibility ('it is plausible that X'), then it is defeated by the statement 'X is not in any way plausible' or (2) if it is a prescriptive claim ('one ought to interpret the work in this manner') then it can be rejected if the prescription contradicts certain facts about the work.

I have established that with Barnes' conception of interpretation we can reject implausible interpretations, thus avoiding the chaotic free-for-all that Hirsch envisioned. Furthermore, although her theory cannot limit the possible scope of interpretations to only one per work of art, which allows conflicting interpretations, artists seem to welcome this richness of meaning (in spite of the complaining that occurs if an artist does not like a particular interpretation). If this were not so, artists would not choose the particular medium that they did, would be more clear with their word choice and symbols, or would provide interpretational indexes. Specifying a particular passage or symbolism as ambiguous, as

Hirsch said one should (Hirsch 21), is only necessary insofar as we accept that all art endeavors somewhat ambiguous.

Therefore, we can see the benefits of adopting a more moderate position through Barnes' examples. There is a beneficial relationship between the artist's intention and meanings drawn from the formal qualities of the work. Rather than the two types of meaning being at odds with each other, they can work together in order to increase the richness of meaning. In this manner, works of art best serve the contemplational and interpretational needs that they are created to make without suffering from the problems that the extreme positions cause.

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