

Is There Room for Aesthetic Experience in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*?

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Richard Shusterman has argued that by focusing too much on the distinction between art and reality Arthur Danto's philosophy of art fails to take aesthetic experience into proper consideration.¹ Besides, in Shusterman's view, Danto is too heavily guided by "the wrapper model of definition", the kind of traditional **and, in Shusterman's eyes, backward-looking form of** philosophical inquiry whose goal is to classify reality into different clearly demarcated categories. By searching for the features that separate art from reality Danto ends up putting "art in a box".²

Now, accusing Danto for ignoring the importance of aesthetic questions, particularly after the publication of *The Abuse of Beauty* (2003), does not seem appropriate. Since Shusterman's criticism predates the new work, it may be unfair to draw on *The Abuse of Beauty* in the attempt to respond to Shusterman's criticism. However, I believe that already *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* contains a theory of aesthetics, a fact overlooked by Shusterman. I will focus on the seventh chapter of the work where Danto analyzes the nature of artistic representation, a part of *The Transfiguration* that Noël Carroll has, in fact, called "overlooked" and "misunderstood".³ In my view, the analysis presented there, particularly Danto's emphasis on the metaphorical nature of artistic representation, actually implies a notion of aesthetic experience or "artistic experience", as Danto himself calls it.⁴ In my view, this notion is not so very different from that of

¹ Shusterman (2000/1997, 29–30).

² Shusterman (2000, 39–41).

³ Carroll (1993, 80).

⁴ Danto (1981, 95, 174). Further references to *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* are indicated by the abbreviation *TC*.

aesthetic experience. My aim here is to defend Danto's account against Shusterman's criticism.

Danto's notion of artistic experience also relates to another important theme of his work. Shortly after the publication of *The Transfiguration*, Danto introduced an account of the history of philosophy according to which parts of it can be seen as a "philosophical disenfranchisement of art". With the notion of disenfranchisement Danto refers to a tendency in philosophy to see art as inferior to philosophy and cognitively unimportant. Danto's notion of artistic experience is particularly relevant for his view on how art can be re-enfranchised, i.e., how art, in fact, can be seen to possess cognitively significant features. Shusterman thinks that Danto's attempt to re-enfranchise art inevitably fails precisely because by drawing a distinction between art and reality Danto's theory is unable to embrace those features, which are crucial for art's re-enfranchisement. In my view, a more meticulous analysis of *The Transfiguration* suggests a different reading of Danto's theory.

In Danto's account, artworks differ from "mere real things" in that the former possess something Danto calls "aboutness". It is a necessary condition of art that the entity has content or that it is about something.⁵ Moreover, Danto believes that interpretation is essential in constituting this relation of aboutness. As Danto says, alluding to Berkeley, an artwork's *esse* is *interpretari*.⁶ Interpretation, in turn, has a close connection to the ways in which objects are responded to. This is because two indiscernible objects will elicit different responses under different interpretations. The response will also be different in the case where no interpretation is involved. This leads Danto to suggest "that there are two orders of aesthetic response, depending upon whether the response is to an artwork or to a mere real thing that cannot be told apart from it".⁷ This implies that

⁵ *TC*, (52–53).

⁶ *TC*, (125).

⁷ *TC*, (94).

responses to artworks differ fundamentally from mere observations because they involve a cognitive element in the sense that one must have knowledge of the identity of the source in order to respond to it accurately.⁸

To be sure, other forms of representation require interpretation. So, this notion by itself does not distinguish artworks from other vehicles of representation. Hence, the question emerges “How do we distinguish artworks from other representations?”⁹

In *The Transfiguration*, Danto suggests that artistic representation is made unique through possessing metaphorical, expressive, and stylistic properties. While ordinary representations are marked by a transparency between the medium and what is represented, artworks always picture a certain kind of attitude towards what they are about. In this sense, artworks are “opaque”.¹⁰ A closer look at what Danto means by claiming that artistic representation is characterized by a metaphorical structure shows that his theory contains an aesthetic element.

Metaphor is a rhetorical trope and Danto thinks that the structure of artistic representation is of a piece with the structure of rhetoric. Both are characterized by a certain kind of openness, which gives the receiver a unique place. Rhetoric in general does not produce its intended causes by stating explicit facts, but rather, it contains hidden premises and assertions, which the receiver must fill-in for herself. It is precisely this feature that makes rhetoric such a strong medium. Through its open structure that requires filling-in, rhetoric produces a much more powerful effect on the receiver than arguments, which rely on explicit statements. As Danto says, in rhetoric the auditor is “participating in a process rather than just being encoded as a tabula rasa”.¹¹

The metaphorical nature of artworks has a parallel structure through which the mind is being moved. Artistic representation presents its content through metaphorical ellipsis

⁸ *TC*, (95–99).

⁹ *TC*, (139).

¹⁰ Carroll (1993, 84).

¹¹ *TC*, (170).

and thus invites the spectator to a cognitive co-operation to ponder the content of the work under a certain description. But since the metaphorical structure demands the activity of the receiver in the form of interpretation, the resulting effect is stronger than it is in the case of transparent representational vehicles. To borrow Danto's example, a statue of Napoleon wearing a Roman toga is intended to cause the spectator to take a similar standing of awe and respect on Napoleon than on a Roman Emperor. And yet again, the response thus elicited is much more intensive than it would be if the claim about Napoleon had been expressed by means of a direct statement.

For Danto, the metaphorical structure of artistic representation entails that there can be no substitute for a direct encounter with an artwork because "no paraphrase or summary of an artwork can engage the participatory mind in at all the ways that it [the directly perceived metaphor] can".¹² The power of metaphor is based essentially on something that must be experienced or "felt", as Danto says, and that no linguistic paraphrase can capture. While a linguistic interpretation may help the viewer to understand and feel the metaphor of the work, it can never serve as a substitute for a direct experience. This very impossibility of a surrogate serves to show how important artistic experience is for Danto's account.¹³

According to Danto, metaphor is at the heart of the two other distinctive features of artistic representation, expression and style. The connection is particularly close with expression, for the artwork's ability to be expressive is based on the way in which the work represents its content, i.e., its metaphorical structure. The verticality of Beauvais Cathedral can be considered an "artistic property" until one understands the verticality "as a metaphor for the ascent of the soul". After this realization, the visual form of the cathedral is "felt as an expressive property".¹⁴ Through the workings of the metaphoric

¹² *TC*, (173).

¹³ *TC*, (174).

¹⁴ *TC*, (193).

structure, which gives the visual verticality of the cathedral a new character, the experience becomes more complex, involving various connotations this religious theme has. For these reasons, I think Noël Carroll is absolutely right in claiming that, at the end, Danto's theory is "a variant of expressionism".¹⁵

These examples taken from *The Transfiguration* indicate a different conclusion concerning the relationship between aesthetic experience and Danto's theory than the one suggested by Shusterman. To my mind, there is no reason why Danto's notion of artistic experience could not be considered an aesthetic experience. After all, it involves feelings, emotions, and an active participation from the viewer, both central aspects of any account of aesthetic experience. In fact, Danto's view seems to come rather close to John Dewey's account of aesthetic experience, which has been the central inspiration behind Shusterman's view. If Danto's notion of artistic experience is really marked by a participation and engagement that is achieved through the way in which the metaphorical structure manages to co-opt our beliefs and emotions, as I have argued, I cannot see that Danto's view is that far removed from Dewey's description of aesthetic experience as an intensive, cumulative, demarcated unity.¹⁶ At least, both stress the interaction between the object and the viewer. Besides, if aesthetic experience were not a central element of Danto's theory, why would he insist on the necessity of a direct encounter with a work of art, as he does? Even if the metaphoric structure could be sufficiently explained in linguistic terms, the decisive feature of artistic representation would be lost, i.e., the artistic experience engendered by the work. "A description of a metaphor simply does not have the power of the metaphor it describes..."¹⁷ Thus, I think it is inaccurate to describe Danto's *Transfiguration* as a work where aesthetic questions would be in some ways shunned or their relevance not acknowledged.

¹⁵ Carroll (1993, 79).

¹⁶ Dewey (1980).

¹⁷ *TC*, (173).

This being said, it is, of course, evident that the aesthetic theory set up in *The Transfiguration* falls rather short of the kind of comprehensive theory of aesthetics that Shusterman has been developing in recent years. A significant difference between the two is that while in *The Transfiguration*, Danto leaves certain forms of aesthetic phenomena virtually untouched Shusterman's pragmatist aesthetics precisely aims at showing the importance of such topics as the body or rap-music for aesthetic discourse. Perhaps Shusterman is right when he says that in *The Transfiguration* non-art related aesthetics is identified "with a caricature of the narrowest of Kantian formalism".¹⁸ But if this is correct, then I think it is so only implicitly.

Another difference between Shusterman and Danto is more interesting. This concerns the way in which they deal with the gap between art and the rest of reality, a gap Shusterman's pragmatist aesthetics is so eager to overcome by stressing the overflowing character of aesthetic experience. In Shusterman's view, the wrapper model theorists, including Danto, overlook this specific feature of aesthetic experience, and, hence, end up creating an undesirable gap between art and life.

However, Danto's notion of artistic experience implies a different view of art's connection to the rest of reality. For Danto, artistic experience is continuous with reality not because it produces qualitatively similar experiences to the experiences produced by ordinary every-day objects, something that is important for Dewey's naturalism, but because artistic experience presupposes various beliefs concerning other parts of reality. For example, beliefs about diagrams and statistics as in the case of Roy Lichtenstein's *A Portrait of Madame Cézanne*¹⁹ or religious beliefs as in the case of Beauvais Cathedral. Thus, Danto cannot be accused of creating a gap between art and the rest of reality. Although artistic experience is unique for art, this form of experience would not be possible if there were a fundamental gap between art and the rest of reality. Without the

¹⁸ Shusterman (2000/1997, 30).

¹⁹ *TC*, (172).

connection to reality, the work of art could not have the metaphorical structure it, in Danto's view, has, and, thus, there could be no artistic experience to speak of. In fact, if Danto's notion of artistic experience can be continuous with reality, it isn't necessary to stress the qualitative overflowingness of aesthetic experience to maintain that there is no gap between art and life, as Shusterman seems to assume.

This discussion leads to the issue of the philosophical disenfranchisement of art that, too, concerns the gap between art and the rest of reality. Danto has offered a reading of the history of philosophy according to which parts of it can be seen as a philosophical disenfranchisement of art, where art has been condemned to a "metaphysical exile".²⁰ With Platonic aesthetics, the philosophical writings on art begun as a rivalry between art and philosophy, Plato placing art two steps below the kingdom of forms in his order of being, and insisting that only philosophy is concerned with something real and important. According to Danto, Kant sustained this pessimistic picture of art's power to make something significant happen by emphasizing the disinterested nature of aesthetic contemplation.²¹

While Shusterman agrees with Danto's critical analysis, he is skeptical about Danto's prospects for re-enfranchising art. Shusterman, in fact, thinks that Danto is trapped in the very same distinction between art and reality as Plato before him, the only difference being that Danto turns Plato's hierarchy upside down. For Danto, art is not less than reality. Rather, in Danto's picture, the realm of art becomes a kingdom of significant meanings that ordinary objects cannot have. Unlike for Plato, things in the real world are left in a degraded, untransfigured ontological category. According to Shusterman, Danto's distinction between artworks and mere real things overlooks that "art is undeniably real; it exists concretely and vividly in our world, constituting, for some of us,

²⁰ Gilmore (2005, 145).

²¹ Danto (1986, 5–11).

a central, irreplaceable part of our lives”.²² Since Danto’s theory fails to embrace these aspects, its attempt to re-enfranchise art fails, Shusterman claims.²³

In my view, this accusation is not particularly fair, for it is precisely the relation between art and rhetoric that allows Danto to re-enfranchise art and to explain how art can, in fact, be a powerful medium. There is no reason to underestimate the power of art to make something happen since, together with rhetoric, it can “modify the minds and then the actions of men and women by co-opting their feelings”.²⁴ But if the structure of artworks involves this kind of relation to emotions, beliefs and other propositional attitudes, I cannot see how Danto’s theory could be accused of neglecting the undeniable reality of artworks or to impoverish their power of making something happen in the kind of reality Shusterman is referring to. Rather, given that rhetoric is a powerful medium, “there is reason after all to be afraid of art”.²⁵

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²² Shusterman (2002/1993, 184).

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Danto (1986, 21).

²⁵ Ibid.

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