

The Ontology of Style

Stephen Snyder
Saint Louis University

Arthur Danto's notion of style cannot account for the power of the metaphor he claims is embedded within the work of art. In *Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, Danto argues that the active component of art is akin to metaphor. This moment, which lends art the power to be something more than the material it is made of, has an effect on par with that of rhetoric. The process of artistic creation that Danto lays out in *Transfiguration* is two-phased. Through their style, artists are able to grasp the meaning manifest in history and embody it in their art. The artists' style, impervious to them, is, nonetheless, visible to others, and through the beholder's interpretation, artworks are actualized, so to speak. But Danto's definition of style, as I aim to show, cannot provide the artwork with the power of rhetoric, for, if nothing else, rhetoric is a carefully aimed tool. If opacity is involved, it is on the part of the audience, intuitively filling in what is missing, not on the part of the rhetorician, who knows well the ellipsis the audience should complete. Danto's theory of art entails a rich notion of metaphor. This is only sustainable if his theory acknowledges the interaction between creator and beholder that must exist when the artwork's intention comes into being.

Style. Plato is critical of the rhapsode Ion, whose recitations of the works of Homer far surpass the efforts of others. Despite this ability, when reciting other poets, Ion's performance is lacking. Thus, Socrates claims that the "song stitcher" is "unable to speak on Homer with art and knowledge (τέχνη καὶ ἐπιστήμη - *technē* and *epistemē*)," for Ion can neither explain nor reproduce the quality of his Homeric recitations.¹ It is Plato's

aim to convince us that art is either a distorted copy of the real or irrational incantations. Without accepting the conclusions of Plato's critique of art, Danto acknowledges the claim that Ion recites without "knowledge or art."ⁱⁱ Socrates concludes that Ion's inexplicable ability issues not from craft but from divine power.

For the poet is a light and winged and sacred thing, and is unable to indite until he has been inspired and put out of his senses, and his mind is no longer in him...For not by art do they utter these things, but by divine influence; since, if they had fully learnt by art to speak on one kind of theme, they would know how to speak on all.ⁱⁱⁱ

Danto agrees that this ability is not a craft, for it cannot be learned. It is a gift, the gift of style.

Style, for Danto, encompasses the ability to see directly what others see indirectly. Those who do not possess style must imitate. Imitators can acquire a manner by learning, but only by imitating those with style. Thus, when one has learned the manner of style, one knows in a mediated fashion; whereas the one who manifests style, prehends it in an unmediated way. Artists like Ion, who demonstrate an innate sense of style, are unable to explain their talent, for they are in possession of something akin to divine dispensation.

Danto defines style as the physiognomic self-representation of the artist. This representation, imperceptible to artists, is nonetheless perceptible to the audience. Style, for artists, is a manifestation of the way they view and inhabit the world, something of which they are not conscious. This way of coloring the world, embodied within the material of the artwork, entices the audience to interpret the artwork. Thus, the essence of the work of art comes through its interpretation, "*esse is interpretari*," because the artwork is created such that it must be interpreted. If the artwork does not evoke an interpretation, even one of negative evaluation, then it fails as an artwork. Hence,

through the higher powers of intuition extant in their style, and without direct knowledge of how they do it, artists must create an interpretable metaphor.

Metaphor and enthymeme. “To understand the artwork is to grasp the metaphor that is, I think, always there.”^{iv} The beholders, when encountering the artwork, open the metaphor within the work, interpreting it within the framework of their own lives. For Danto, “the greatest metaphors of art” are “those in which the spectator identifies himself with the attributes of the represented character: and sees his or her life in terms of the life depicted.” In these cases, “the artwork becomes a metaphor for life and life is transfigured.”^v When the viewer experiences such a work, the artistic illusion is “the enactment of a metaphoric transformation” through which the commonplace is transfigured into something “amazing.”^{vi}

The role of metaphor in mediating the components of style and rhetoric can be described as follows: first, the artists’ style, the physiognomy of the self, creates the metaphor, for “metaphors have to be *made*.”^{vii} Nonetheless, this process is not a conscious one, for the artists’ style, the consciousness of the world they embody in their works, is hidden from them. Second, the metaphor manifests rhetorical characteristics, for its purpose is to provoke the audience, to effect some feeling in them that completes the artists’ gestures of meaning. The relationship between the artists and the audience is such that the artists’ intentions, in a rhetorical fashion, evoke a response from the viewer, completing the metaphorical ellipsis.

Danto references Aristotle’s discussion of the enthymeme in *Rhetoric*, suggesting that the artistic metaphor is similar to the enthymeme, a syllogism with a missing step.^{viii} Though Aristotle discusses many different forms of the syllogistic enthymeme, the type

that contains a maxim as an unstated part of the syllogism is the form pertinent to Danto's discussion.^{ix} This implies that the one using the enthymeme, and Aristotle is clear that its usage is to manipulate the audience, must have some knowledge of the addressees and their wishes in order to imply an acceptable maxim in the place of the missing part. The maxim is a general statement that will go unquestioned by the audience. It is refutable, but it will not be questioned immediately if the metaphor it employs is neither too far-fetched nor too obvious.^x "Now, a maxim is a statement, not however concerning particulars, as, for instance, what sort of a man Iphicrates was, but general; it does not even deal with all general things...but with objects of human action."^{xi} The orator must know the audience. The metaphor couched within the maxim must go unnoticed, compelling the audience to complete the persuasive syllogism without scrutiny.

It is Danto's claim that the metaphoric meaning, hidden as it were within the enthymeme, shares the structure of the metaphor embodied within the artwork. The rhetorical component in the work of art, though not mapped directly from language to the visual medium, functions in much the same way. It is the rhetorical element of metaphor that transfigures one mode of speech into another. The words retain the same meaning, but, in their usage, they acquire new meanings; they are "transfigured" and not "transformed."^{xii} In the form of an enthymeme, the transfiguration occurs when the listener is made to fill in the gap. The listener is compelled to make the connection, guided by the rhetorician to fill in the ellipsis. The critical piece, in Danto's account, is that Aristotle has "identified something crucial: the middle term has to be found, the gap has to be filled in, the mind moved to action."^{xiii} The metaphor, in Danto's schema, is a minor work of art. It is about words in the same way that an artwork is about things in

the real world. This metaphoric representation exhibits the artwork's embedded intention. For Danto, perceiving the contrast in forms of usage is essential because "to understand the artwork is to grasp the metaphor" within.^{xiv}

The maxim that makes the enthymeme effective, as the visual metaphor conjured by the artist for the work of art is a gesture or a generalization that is specific to a cultural context. Hence, a considerable level of "cultural competence" is needed to implant the metaphoric gesture in the syllogism.^{xv} As the maxim, which functions within a shifting historical and cultural context, visual metaphors can become stale, change or be forgotten. It is often necessary, Danto contends, that the metaphors of art require "scholarly resurrection." Thus, "it is the great value of such disciplines as the history of art and of literature to make such works approachable again."^{xvi} The world of metaphor requires a heightened level of cultural competence to access and manipulate; therefore, if one has no such cultural competence, one will not understand, much less create, a metaphor. This culturally elevated metaphoric layer *is* the medium of the artworld. In the process of transfiguration, an object is detached from reality and placed in another world, a sphere of interpreted things, manifest with the gesture of metaphor.^{xvii} The process of metaphoric creation, embodiment and interpretation "involves a complex interrelation between the framer and the reader of the enthymeme."^{xviii} This indicates that the real medium of the work of art, that which separates it from objects of the everyday, lies in the interactive medium of human consciousness, a dialogue of sorts, provoked by artistic creation.

Style's transitive property. Danto's account of artistic creation and reception includes style as "the relationship between representation and the one who makes the

representation,” and rhetoric “concerns the relation between representation and audience.”^{xix} The gift possessed by Ion is the epitome of what Danto refers to as style: the unmediated ability to speak the words of Homer in a way that cannot be learned. Unmediated expression, when embodied in art, provides those who will interpret the work with the opportunity to experience the stylized incarnation of artistic consciousness that the artists themselves cannot intuit. Ironically, Danto accepts the notion of style as the conduit for artistic meaning, which compels Plato to ban the poets from the polis. In his dialogue with Ion, Socrates compares the inspired performances of Ion to the Heracleian loadstone, or a magnet, which, as we know, will attract iron rings.^{xx} Socrates argues that like the magnetic power of the stone, what is imparted upon the words or images of art through divine inspiration can be transferred to others. An iron ring, having no magnetic power, is transformed through contact with the magnet. By touching the magnet, it receives the magnetic force, and a chain is created, with one ring transferring the force to the next. Socrates tells Ion that the poet has divine inspiration. The rhapsode, reciting the poet’s work, is possessed by the poet’s enchantment in the same manner that the magnet bestows the iron ring with its power. The rhapsodists, as the iron rings, are able to transmit this divine dispensation to others. The last ring on the chain is the spectator, where the transfer of the poet’s energy stops. Danto’s example of the fugue machine reflects how closely his account of artistic style resembles Plato’s. It was claimed that Bach had invented a “fugue-writing machine,” which could produce fugues according to a formula. Danto speculates that if such a machine existed, its products would possess no style.^{xxi} Without the unmediated presence of style, a craft would result

that possessed no transfiguring power. There would be nothing present in the work to interpret.

Danto proposes that the metaphor is the medium through which art transmits its rhetorical “intention.” But Danto’s theory of how artists create metaphors out of the gift of style does not account for the critical role metaphor plays in the artwork’s ability to effect a reaction in the audience. The employment and creation of the metaphor is tied to the “cultural competency” and the ability of artists to read the subtext of historical meaning. The transmission of the intention through the elliptical enthymeme is a notion found in the work of Aristotle, who sought to refute Plato’s theory of art by showing that art was not created through inspiration, but was a *technē* capable of evoking a practical affect on the audience. The comparison of the artwork to the enthymeme, a notion I find compelling, requires more than the artist’s unselfconscious revelation of meaning. It also requires the artist’s crafting the enthymeme such that the metaphor evokes a response from the audience, bringing to light the artwork’s meaning. In agreement with Danto, Aristotle held that the creation of great metaphors could not be learned. Only one with a natural gift could bring them into being.

Discussing how the great poets elevate language above its standard usage, bringing greater clarity to the topic, Aristotle maintains, “their greatest asset is a capacity for metaphor.” In line with Danto’s claim, Aristotle continues, “this alone cannot be acquired from another, and is a sign of natural gifts.”^{xxii} But the power of the poet to create metaphor comes from the capacity “to discern similarities.” In *Rhetoric*, reiterating assertions he made in *Poetics*, Aristotle states that the power of the poem, as that of prose, comes from the metaphor, which “cannot be learnt from anyone else.”^{xxiii}

Nonetheless, even if one has the gift of creating metaphor, if it is to be effective, the gift must be employed appropriately. “This will be secured by observing due proportion; otherwise there will be a lack of propriety, because it is when placed in juxtaposition that contraries are most evident.”^{xxiv} This is achieved, as stated above, through the apt and conscious application of the metaphor, which involves knowledge of the audience and its placement in the context that best affords the desired effect. The practical usage of rhetoric found in metaphor, the same power the artwork utilizes to affect the audience, is a *technē* requiring an *interrelationship* between the artist and the audience. This aspect of metaphoric usage is not included in Danto’s account of style and rhetoric.

Art does something. For art to escape philosophy’s disenfranchisement, which centers on claims reducing art’s status by arguing that either art does nothing or that it is irrational, Danto asserts it must be recognized that *art does something*. This acknowledges Plato’s fear of art’s power without succumbing to his desire to banish art from the realm of intelligible reality.^{xxv} However, Danto’s account of the generation of metaphor through the unconscious medium of style minimizes the potential art has in effecting change. In fact, the lack of control artists have over their gift, as Danto describes it, would serve to support Plato’s fear of the artists’ irrational power rather than allay it. In Danto’s theory of style, the artist’s embodiment of meaning underwrites an uncritical ontological existence, which relies on an unmediated connection to stylistic revelation to maintain its essential distance from the history in which the artwork is embedded. Certainly, artists possess a gift, for without their superior intuitions, their works would not raise art—visual, poetic or any another medium—to the elevated status achieved through the artists’ transfiguration. But without contesting artists’ superior

intuitions, removing the stipulation of style's impenetrable metaphoric generation would make room for a formulation of artistic creation that better supports art's capacity to evoke critical self-reflection. Each new interpretation of the art object, according to Danto, yields a new artwork (I(o)=W).^{xxvi} But Danto's claim that the artwork is essentially an interpreted medium belies the narrow ontological definition of the artwork's stylistic provenance. The unmediated infusion of style into the artwork would preclude such interpretive activity in the audience, for, if this were correct, without style, the audience's interpretation, like the iron rings without the magnet, could produce no new artwork.

Aristotle argued that artists do have knowledge of what they create; thus, artistic creation is a *technē*. This is not to say that the power of art is transparent, that the creative process is a purely rational one. After all, public scrutiny would dissolve art's mystery—the rationalistic Socratic notion of what good art ought to be could well have led to what Nietzsche argued was the death of tragedy. Though the message of art and the process of its creation is opaque, it is not blind. Part of the artists' craft is knowing how to wield their "divine dispensation." Thus, the process of metaphoric creation entails a dialogue of sorts, one that relies on the interaction of artists and audience. Though artists may not explicitly cognize their intent, they make art to achieve some effect, and this process cannot be completely outside of consciousness. The opaque communication offered by artists may be rhetorical. And though the power of rhetoric should be feared, as Plato claimed, its uses go beyond that of deception. The rhetorical power of art is able to provide an opaque metaphor, using its elliptical properties to intimate concepts that prosaic expressions cannot achieve. But achieving such an effect

through the opacity of the artistic medium is not possible without the conscious efforts of artists to understand and interact with their audience and their history.

ⁱ Plato, *Ion* in *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vol. viii, trans. W.R.M. Lamb (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 1960), 532c.

ⁱⁱ Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 198-201.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ion*, 534b.

^{iv} *Transfiguration*, 172.

^v *Ibid.*

^{vi} *Ibid.*, 173.

^{vii} *Ibid.*, 175.

^{viii} “We have already said that the enthymeme (ἐνθύμημα) is a kind of syllogism, what makes it so, and in what it differs from the dialectic syllogisms; for the conclusion must neither be drawn from too far back nor should it include all the steps of the argument.” Aristotle, *The “Art” of Rhetoric*, trans. John Henry Freese (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1926), II, 22, 1395b.

^{ix} *Rhetoric*, II, 21, 1394a.

^x *Ibid.*, III, 10, 1410b.

^{xi} *Ibid.*, II, 21, 1394a.

^{xii} *Transfiguration*, 168.

^{xiii} *Ibid.*, 171.

^{xiv} *Ibid.*, 172.

^{xv} *Ibid.*, 177.

^{xvi} *Ibid.*, 174.

^{xvii} *Ibid.*, 175. “So it is essential to our study that we understand the nature of an art theory, which is so powerful a thing as to detach objects from the real world and make them part of a different world, and art world, a world of interpreted things.”

^{xviii} *Ibid.*, 170.

^{xix} *Ibid.*, 198.

^{xx} *Ion*, 533d-536d.

^{xxi} *Transfiguration*, 203.

^{xxii} Aristotle, *Poetics in Aristotle on Poetics, Longinus on the Sublime, Demetrius on Style*, trans. Stephen Halliwell, W.H. Fyfe, and Doreen C. Innes (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 1459a, 5-8.

^{xxiii} *Rhetoric*, 1405a 9.

^{xxiv} *Ibid.*, 1405a, 9-10.

^{xxv} See Danto’s *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

^{xxvi} *Transfiguration*, 125.