

## **Do the Arts really need Aesthetics? If not, who does?**

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The painter Barnett Newman said: 'I feel that even if aesthetics is established as a science, it doesn't affect me as an artist. I've done quite a bit of work in ornithology and I have never met an ornithologist who thought that ornithology was for the birds.'<sup>1</sup>

If, like ornithology for birds, aesthetics is not for artists, then who *is* it for? Is it only for the edification of other aestheticians, or does the work they do filter down to lovers of the arts? A way of approaching these two questions is to look at the reciprocal influence that the philosophy of the arts has upon the actual practice of them. I will briefly outline Danto's two apparently contradictory claims in Chapter 3 of his *Transfiguration of the Commonplace*<sup>2</sup> that firstly, for non-philosophers, the philosophy of art has always seemed to be unproductive and irrelevant, giving rise to a certain amount of hostility by practitioners towards the theoretical treatment of their activity.<sup>3</sup> Secondly he then states that 'the philosophical question of art's status has almost become the very essence of art itself, so that philosophy, instead of standing outside the subject, and addressing it from an alien and external perspective, has become instead the articulation of the internal energies of the subject.'<sup>4</sup> Danto goes on to expand these ideas in his own way, but I will use them as a starting point and then develop them from a different perspective. I shall attempt to refute the second statement, and find a way between these two positions by examining more closely the nature of the 'languages' of the arts, and the relationship which they can have with philosophy.

I have used the word 'language' here to refer to the modes of expression peculiar to each art. The word is not entirely satisfactory with its associations of 'tongue', but I also wanted to draw a comparison between normal linguistic expression and the other arts. Secondly, for brevity's sake, I sometimes use the singular form of the word 'art', while intending it to include all the arts, literature, music and so on.

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<sup>1</sup> Newman 1990, p. 247.

<sup>2</sup> Danto 1981, pp. 54-89.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

Since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the plethora of theories as to art's defining features does seem to betray a deep-seated perplexity about the nature of the arts and their place in society, as well as their meaning and function for the individual. This begs the question as to why such definitions have been, and still are, so ardently sought, in other fields as well as aesthetics. I, like other practitioners, wonder how these definitions actually enlighten anyone when confronted with something which is purported to be a work of art: do they help us decide whether it *is* one, and if so is it a good one, and other related questions. In other words, whether the interest we take in the arts is in danger of becoming absorbed by philosophical enquiry, and having come under its sway has become separated from the sensibility with which it is more naturally associated. That is to say, the arts themselves were not a philosophical problem until 'aesthetics' came along. In fact, if, as Danto says, the philosophy of art has become central to art itself, then this entanglement of art and aesthetics could lead to the situation where contemporary art only speaks to those who have read the theories from whence the art came.

Danto's first claim about the irrelevance of philosophy to those 'inside' the life of art seems to indicate that it is not so much the practice and enjoyment of the arts which needs these theories, but that the practice of *philosophy* needs them. It spawns them to satisfy its own cast of mind which seeks such explanations, the arts being one of those subjects which are amenable to philosophy. Danto then goes on to ask 'Why is it that art can be the sort of thing of which there *can* be a philosophy,' and replies 'I believe the things of philosophical moment to be logically closed' (and that there are) 'a whole cycle of internally related topics ... (so that the philosopher) will inevitably come to art.'<sup>5</sup> He doesn't go on to tell us what characterizes those fields but one could say that a subject amenable to philosophy is one whose boundaries have not yet been defined, or cannot be envisaged. Or it could be a subject whose boundaries were once well defined but which is now in a state of flux; this makes it susceptible to philosophical enquiry, and its very recalcitrance to easy answers makes that enquiry worthwhile.

Perhaps all of the arts have been less susceptible to enquiry during phases of their development when the tradition was well established, and changes occurred more gradually than they have done in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The emergence of entirely new

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 54

forms, and at an unprecedented rate, such as atonality in music and Dada<sup>6</sup> in the visual arts, prompt many questions about ontology and value, and perhaps it is in this 'insecure' state that the arts are more susceptible to questions about their status and nature.

There was a time, presumably, when there can have been no possibility of such perplexity about the nature and definition of art. This was partly because no complex abstract language existed in which to express it. That is to say, arguments about the definition, meaning and purpose of the arts are not only parasitic upon the actual practice of them, but the perplexity is to some extent one which has arisen through the use of language. This dialogue between practice, criticism and philosophy could not have existed before the sophisticated use of language exerted its influence on the way we think. Questions of this kind and complexity (such as the questions about the relations between the 'sister arts' or whether there exist reliable criteria for something's being a work of art) can only arise and be framed in a culture where logical disputation is common.<sup>7</sup> And this kind of disputation is itself enhanced by the use of writing. Because (or in spite of) the absence of any written scripts, we have no reason to suppose, for example, that the painters of the Lascaux

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<sup>6</sup> For example, Arp says '... the Dadaists ... put the whole universe on the lofty throne of art. We declared that everything that comes into being or is made by man is art. ... Michelangelo's Moses: Bravo! But at the sight of an inspired snow man, the Dadaists also cried bravo.' (Soby 1958, p. 13.)

<sup>7</sup> This is not to imply, as Bowra and others have suggested, that the language of primitive peoples is simplistic or lacking in powers of analysis or abstraction. The difference is that the myths of such people, embodied in a rich oral tradition, have not been reduced to concepts which are amenable only to the 'rational' mind, but appeal to the understanding by way of the imagination and half-conscious elements. All art in such 'primitive' cultures is an integral part of ritual and ceremony which 'brings men into contact with that dual aspect of themselves, that part of which can only be approached by way of metaphor, visual or otherwise'. (See Cowan 1998, p. 61). By contrast it is the kind of analytic thinking typical of the contemporary western world that produces abstractions which encourage the kind of minute conceptual questioning which in turn *expects an explanatory answer*. See Arnheim 1969, esp. Ch 13. See also Wittgenstein 1974, (6.522): 'There are, indeed, things which cannot be put into words. *They make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical.' And 6.372: '... the view of the ancients is clearer in so far as they have a clear and acknowledged terminus, while the modern system tries to make it look as if everything were explained.' 'Explanations' can only be approached in the arts by treating them as 'data' in a way which both implies and demands a critical distance from them, and an open mind as to their purpose. This is not an attitude typical of 'primitive' cultures, nor of artists. For example, Renoir said 'Nowadays they want to explain everything. But if they could explain a picture it wouldn't be art.' (Quoted in Pach 1984, p. 23). Isadora Duncan is reputed to have said about the dance 'If I could tell you what it meant, there would be no point in dancing it' (Quoted in Astley, Hone and Savage 2000, p. xiv). A similar remark has also been attributed to Pavlova. Whatever the provenance of their comments, the fact that they have become common property indicates that such feelings about the arts are widespread amongst practitioners.

caves had the degree of sophistication of speech language which allowed them to make fine distinctions between, say, pleonasm and tautology.

The long process by which the activities we now call the arts have acquired their own laws and conventions is clearly too complex for anything but the briefest outline. All I want to show here is that it appears that symbolic representations such as painting, sculpture and engraving antedate writing by many thousands of years, and that it must have been *writing* that gave the real impetus to increased mental powers of introspection and analysis. In that I cannot really know what I think till I hear what I say, I have not the power to reorganize what I think until I *see what I say*.

It seems pertinent to remind ourselves of an outline chronology here. It looks as though humans were engaged in the kind of activities which developed into what we call the arts at about 90,000 years ago. The Neanderthal grave with flowers from about this time possibly indicates a sense of reverence for a fellow human and a sensibility towards the unknown. The Venus of Willendorf of 25,000 years ago is believed to be significant as some kind of votive figure. Although we cannot be certain as to the meaning of the paintings in the Ardèche and Lascaux caves, at about 20-30,000 years BC, the community which produced them must by then have had language skills which enabled them to describe the difference between a real reindeer and a painted one. A flute of bird bone, 9,000 years old, has been found in China which plays the pentatonic scale, indicating a quite sophisticated grasp of the organization of pitched sound. The first written scripts, however do not emerge until about 3,500 BC, which indicates the relatively late part that writing played in the development of human thought. And writing (and so reading), unlike the sequential medium of speech, is a 'parallel' mode of thought, allowing recapitulation and reappraisal along the way. It is half way between the presentational image and storytelling.

This indicates that the activities of image-making, modelling and no doubt singing and dancing were some of the earliest means by which humankind attempted to interpret phenomena which were significant to them, and also events which seemed beyond their control; as they did this they both expressed an understanding of the human condition, and so expanded that understanding. This being so it seems reasonable to infer that these kinds of activity, which we have

come to call the arts, are more deeply rooted in human consciousness than the more supposedly precise activities of writing and mathematics.<sup>8</sup> In the same way, the child draws before it writes and so proceeds from a seemingly less accurate but no less expressive mode of thought to a more focused one.

Over the millennia, each art, because of its particular medium and the materials it uses, has developed into a unique mode of thought for both the artist and audience; those thoughts and ideas are inseparable from the mode in which they are expressed. The artist, musician, choreographer or architect does not start with a ‘verbal’ idea which he then translates into material: the idea very often comes *out of the material*. The critic Hanslick said ‘The composer composes and thinks, but he composes and thinks in *tones*’<sup>9</sup> and the painter Ernst Zoble maintains that ‘Of course it is possible to have all sorts of theories and ideas, but what it comes to in the end is to use paint rather than words – to do your talking or thinking with your medium.’<sup>10</sup> The sculptor Anish Kapoor asserts that ‘The role of an artist is to discover that which is outside of words.’<sup>11</sup> By prescient criticism or interpretation we may be able to give insight into a work of art, but that should only serve to draw us back to contemplate the work itself. As we look or listen, something is being made known to us through another ‘language’, one which we do not necessarily have to *speak* to be able to *understand*.

Hywel, the poet warrior, David Jones declares, may well have had a keen visual awareness, but he would not have given us ‘... a single line of his famous poem in praise of North Wales unless he first loved an art form or rather had himself been mastered by the elusive constraints of that very specialized art, Welsh 12<sup>th</sup>-century prosody.’<sup>12</sup> Poetry, as R.S. Thomas has said, comes from language, not from the landscape.<sup>13</sup> The prolonged involvement with the material of any art, in making you more keenly aware of that medium, also hones the senses through which it primarily operates. It is thinking through seeing, thinking through hearing, thinking through

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<sup>8</sup> Many of the earliest scripts were tabulations of property, trade and so on. ‘Among the 1<sup>st</sup> applications of writing were administration, trade and sacred texts. It brought permanency and mobility.’ (See Dalby 2000, p. 44).

<sup>9</sup> Hanslick 1986, p. 82. See also Arnheim 1969, p. 229 ‘Musical thinking takes place entirely within the formal resources of the medium itself’.

<sup>10</sup> *Brenda Chamberlain and Ernst Zoble*, Catalogue for the Welsh Arts Council Exhibition, 1963.

<sup>11</sup> On BBC Radio 3, 28<sup>th</sup> December, 2000, in the series *Belief*.

<sup>12</sup> Jones 1979, p. 29.

<sup>13</sup> See also Jones 1979, p. 29 ‘the inception or renewal or deepening of some artistic vitality comes to the artist via some other artist or some existing art form, not via nature.’

movement, touch and even taste. The influence of the medium – the material to hand – has always been of paramount importance. Throughout the ages new materials have offered new possibilities, from the invention of moveable type, oil paint and the keyed trumpet, to electronic tape, the microphone and laser printing. It is characteristic of the arts that they feed upon their own mediums and draw inspiration from them, creating new syntheses with that other kind of raw ‘material’ which they import from the outside world. These new materials and modes of presentation themselves evoke thoughts which could not have been embodied in any other way.

Perhaps this is what Mendelssohn meant when he said that words ‘... have so many meanings, they are so imprecise, so easy to misunderstand, in comparison with music. A piece of music ... expresses thoughts to me that are not too *imprecise* to be framed in words, but too *precise*’<sup>14</sup>. But it is inevitable that a practitioner would hold this view, because his familiarity with the medium refines his ability to both find meaning in it and use it meaningfully. So it seems that it is the artist’s prolonged and committed use of a medium that gives him increasing expressive power, just as the use of words does for the writer. In both cases, the symbols and, more specifically, the context in which they are used, acquire increasing transparency of meaning.<sup>15</sup>

In its widest sense, all language is essentially a means of communication between people, a transmission and reception of ideas and feelings. But all art and language have this in common, that their use actually creates new insights and subtleties of meaning. In this sense, then the arts must be seen to be ‘languages’ of a kind. The arts can articulate relationships, states of affairs, tensions, feelings, situations, each in a unique way.<sup>16</sup> Without the medium of each art’s language, the message is stillborn. There is also another significant aspect shared by both words and the languages of the arts, one which is, as it were, the reverse side of the first

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<sup>14</sup> Cited in Le Huray and Day 1987, p. 457. I cannot resist a contrasting quote from the BFG here: ‘And sometimes human beans is very overcome when they is hearing wondrous music. ... the music is saying something to them. It is sending them a message. I do not think the human beans is knowing what the message is, but they is loving it just the same.’ (Dahl 1982, p. 98)

<sup>15</sup> There have been various attempts to show that modes of the arts follow the paradigm of linguistics (Derycke Cooke, Johannes Itten, Leonard Bernstein), however, no such precise and *generalized* connotations seem to reside in keys, melodic successions, colours, shapes and gestures, even within a single culture.

<sup>16</sup> For example, the way that the blush of colour settles on the little child in *Schindler’s List*, telling of Schindler’s awakening to her as an individual person. This could only happen in the art of film.

aspect: working in a particular artistic medium also draws the practitioner into a heightened awareness of the medium; he *can* become consciously aware of this kind of thought-in-sound or gesture, or thought-in-colour in a way which allows him to detach it from its current application and envisage its use in another context.<sup>17</sup>

Danto comments on the similarly self-reflexive trait of philosophy when he says that

‘ ... whatever I think about, I at the same time learn something about it, and about thought itself.’<sup>18</sup> Danto goes on to say that while philosophy has this peculiar trait, its nature is also such ‘ ... as to be logically co-implicated with anything it might treat of (the first of the two similarities)’. The artist, then, might answer that since *his* language is certainly co-implicated with anything it might treat of, then the arts can be shown to have this reflexivity too. If they have, then this casts a different light on the possibility of philosophy being able to infiltrate art, to become interior to it, in the way that Danto suggests.

As a modification of his thesis, the self-reflexive trait in the arts could operate something like this: if I think about something, then at the same time as I learn about the something, it is possible to learn about thought itself. If this principle is carried over to the arts, then, even if I am not a practitioner, the something I learn about or experience through the medium of an art, could teach me something about the *art's* mode of ‘thought’. Whether or not this enables me, in Croce’s sense, to ‘become an artist’ is a different matter.<sup>19</sup> This being so, what is ‘reflexed’ is a something already inside the art, a particular way of thinking in that art’s special language. These ways of thinking, ways of having ideas, could include playing with perspective, or the intervention of the narrator, the idea of *focus*, or the emotive properties of colour and rhythm. Others could include the very experience of the work, a feature which we can trace, for example, to contemporary ‘interactive’ installations in the visual arts.<sup>20</sup> The blurring of distinctions between performer and

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<sup>17</sup> For example, the colour scheme in a flower painting used for another subject, a rhyme pattern adapted for another poem, a rhythm from a hymn tune used for a dance.

<sup>18</sup> Danto op. cit., p. 54.

<sup>19</sup> Given the origins of the word *art* and *poet*, from Sanskrit, Greek and Latin, which are to do with making, fitting together, then to be an artist means more than having conceptions, insights, or imaginative intuitions. See Jones 1973, pp. 150-151.

<sup>20</sup> For example, the exhibition *Audible Light*, Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, Jan–Feb 2000. Here, your movements affected what you saw and heard. Also *Le Clom Troc*, an innovative installation piece in the form of a ‘Bring and Buy Sale’ (Nantes, France, 2001). Both these pieces *enact* our interaction with a work of art; the latter work plays upon the idea that we bring our knowledge,

audience can lead to the repositioning of musicians amongst the audience, or the ‘open-ended’ novel. We can play with ideas as to where the work begins and ‘real’ life ends. A development of this is that medium-related ideas, inherent in artistic practice, can themselves be fed back into the art as subject matter and content. What becomes foregrounded in some kinds of contemporary work are the *means of presentation*, and it is these which seem to absorb into themselves the question of their own identity. These were originally the means whereby content was communicated; they become that in which content is embodied, and gradually can *become the content itself*. In much *avant-garde* work what has become central are ideas which have been suggested by the medium, and by the way of working with it. In fact, the medium itself has become the subject matter of its own messages. In this way all the arts evolve from within themselves, and as we recognize in contemporary art echoes of an earlier tradition, we can enrich our experience of both.

By foregrounding these medium-related ideas, the arts create and promote an awareness of their own languages. But if this is the case, then it follows that the language that (each) art becomes conscious of must be its *own*. Each of the arts embodies a unique mode of thought, by operating in a medium which not only transforms ideas at source, but is itself part of the idea. Like any language, the medium of each art contributes to its own renewal; art is both the victim of its limits and the extender of those limits. This means that no mode of thought other than that which is natural to the art in question could ever become *central* to it.

Danto says the question which becomes internal to art, that of its own status, is a question which has come to it from *outside*, from philosophy. And philosophy is irrevocably couched not only in speech, but in writing. So it looks as though Danto is in danger of saying that philosophical consciousness has so infiltrated art that, like a cuckoo in the nest, it ousts the qualities on which that art originally depended. My thesis is that the arts have not absorbed into themselves the philosophical question ‘What is art?’ to the extent that the tradition or history of art is at an end in the way that Danto suggests. They have undoubtedly had an exchange with philosophy at a time when the pace of change made them particularly susceptible,

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prejudices, memories, preferences and so on, and take something away with us – perhaps an insight, or some increased awareness.

and which has spurred them to further renewal. I have already, in support of this claim, shown that the arts are, and have been for millennia, unique ways of having ideas. And art renews itself, like other fields of activity, out of its own condition as well as out of an exchange with ideas external to itself.<sup>21</sup> The arts have even been dominated by other interests for a time, such as by the Church in the Middle Ages. But they have used these restrictions so imposed upon them to extend themselves, find new strengths and to reassert their identities. Danto suggests that it was works such as the *Brillo Boxes* which rendered the traditional definitions of art irrelevant. This being so, we had to have these works themselves to challenge both their own tradition and the definitions which had hitherto attended them. Philosophical argument, the owl of Minerva, then came in art's wake; there must be art before there can be philosophy of art. And art, we remember, had from the earliest times associations of making, fitting together, ordering, arranging, as David Jones has said 'carpenteries of song'.<sup>22</sup>

The backwash of all this is that the meanings of art are now so much under discussion, so much in flux, that there is a very real tendency to become nervous of approaching any art directly. Perhaps it is a surfeit of criticism (at one remove from the subject) and of philosophy (at one more remove) which is the culprit to some extent here. Like the people watching the 'Emperor's new clothes' procession we are in danger of losing the direct connections that our eyes and ears make with our minds. We have also lost the context which we imagine was in place for the community of Lascaux. As the 20<sup>th</sup>-century artist Paul Klee said: 'The people are no longer with us'.<sup>23</sup>

But if chatter among a circle of bystanders is not to be the end of both ornithology and aesthetics, then does aesthetics have a function other than as a goad to its subjects? Does it help us to learn to love the arts, or distinguish between them, or tell us if they are good ones? Is it even supposed to do these things? I am inclined towards the conclusion that the arts and philosophy are activities which may *seem* to pass each other by, but in fact they interact at many points, and exert a profound reciprocal influence on each other, in ways which we may not immediately

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<sup>21</sup> For example, the exchange of ideas between the arts and sciences.

<sup>22</sup> Jones 1979, p. 31.

<sup>23</sup> Paul Klee 'Uns trägt kein Volk'. In Klee 1969, p. 6.

recognize. But I am not sure whether it was art or philosophy which gave me this idea.

An earlier version of this paper was delivered to the Philosophy Colloquia at the University of Wales, Lampeter on 14<sup>th</sup> February 2001. I am grateful to the audience on that occasion, whose comments and questions led to a number of refinements in the argument.

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## Appendix 2

### Cézanne and Wagner

The following articles were published in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Volume 58, No. 3, Summer 2000.

Cézanne, Wagner,  
Turner



Modulation: A Reply to

In his paper,<sup>1</sup> Norman Turner rightly commences with a note of caution as to the possibility of drawing elaborate parallels between Cézanne's handling of color and Wagner's innovative use of key modulation. De-spote this, some of the parallels that he finally draws on the last two pages seem open to question. The two related claims I want to interrogate are these: First, on page 361 Turner suggests that eighteenth-century harmony is analogous to local color. Then, on page 362 he proposes that, through the use of color modulation, Cézanne foretells Cubism as Wagner opens the way to atonality through his use of key modulation. This implies a link that is worth exploring between the development of the two styles or conventions. There is also a third remark, almost en passant, on page 355 regarding the downfall of geometric perspective. In fact, this offers a more fruitful and accurate parallel with musical tonality and its dissolution than does local color and modeling in the visual arts. The "shared human ground" of movement and transition, as exemplified by modulation in music, is more appropriately extended to perspective and all that it entails in human experience.

Firstly, although Turner has summarized the mechanics of tonality and color modulation, we need a more precise understanding of local color, which I will attempt. Secondly, I will examine briefly by what "retrograde process of creative misunderstanding"<sup>2</sup> Cézanne contributed to the

formation of Cubism, and whether Wagner influenced atonality in the same round-about way. Thirdly, I shall offer what seems to be the more telling, though familiar, parallel in the visual arts with tonal music: that of perspective. This shows how Cézanne's subtle shifts of viewpoint, as much as his subtle shifts of color, demonstrate the idea of departure from a "home base" or stable center, in the way that key modulation does in music. To conclude, I shall try to assess how far this, or any

other interarts analogy, can be pressed and suggest a more creative and realistic way of looking at the problem.

"Local" color is the color of any thing unmodified by a cast of light, atmosphere, or any other factor. Typically, it is the color swatch of, say, house paint viewed in neutral daylight; on the wall of your house it takes on variations in hue according to the quality of the light and shade, the underlying texture of the wall, and the distance from the viewer. It is further affected by the surrounding colors: for example, a terracotta red will appear more intense and "nearer" to the eye when surrounded by its complementary greenish blue; it will appear colder and more distant when juxtaposed with a rich orange, and vibrant beside a dark grey or black, and so on. Grey areas adjacent to this color will tend to take on the complementary hue. as do such neutral tones in nature, as the eye asserts its need to create an optical balance) It was precisely these kinds of

perceptual qualities that intrigued and obsessed not only Cézanne and the Impressionists, but Corot and Turner before them, and, seminally, the eighteenth-century Venetians, whose perception of the mobility of color was doubtless influenced by their watery environment where reflected color permeated the landscape.

Even in a figurative painting, the actual color of the object represented is of less importance than the way it chimes with its neighbors and creates a coherent pat-tern. Yves Bonnefoy describes it as "accepting the colors in this sudden, complete silence, where they are now nothing more than their reciprocal relationship."<sup>4</sup> and Baudelaire expressed it thus: "This color thinks by itself, independently of the object it clothes."<sup>5</sup>

If the local color is a center from which radiates a myriad of subtle changes, such as the table top in Cézanne's *Card Players* or *Vase of Tulips*. Then it will still be apparent that this red or pale grey is

only one of several that go together to form the overall color *scheme*. The overall blue haze of late Cézanne or the sunset glow as seen by Claude pervades the color of everything in it, and gives a scheme to the picture, under the artist's gaze, as it does to nature. A strong overall color bias has the effect of swallowing up the local colors, as they are modified by its pervasive quality. Color scheme, whether or not it is directly derived from the effects of light in nature, gives a certain "state of mind" to a painting, and can be compared to the key governing a piece of music. However, the structure of tonality is such that it only shows allegiance to one key at a time, and the notes are limited to the notes of that key-scale. No such ruling governs the color scheme of a painting, although insofar as all good expression in art demands a limitation of means, painters restrict their choice of colors to maximize expressive potential. The foregoing gives us a certain similarity with music, in that the keynote—the first note of the scale that controls the tonality—reappears frequently during the piece, particularly at salient points, in the same way the color that controls the tonality of a picture appears at salient points of the composition. They both govern the whole, and are at the same time one of the constituent parts. Therefore, the natural analogy with tonality, in the color sense, is not "local" color at all, but the whole color *scheme*.

Cézanne famously instructed Emile Bernard to treat nature "by means of the cylinder, the sphere and the cone, with every thing brought into proper perspective, so that each side of an object or plane is directed toward a central point."<sup>6</sup> In the same way that Cézanne's organizing intelligence classified his sensations of color, so it classified his perception of solid objects. Retreated nature as a coherent plasticity, where the relations of masses are reorganized and rebalanced according to the needs of pictorial composition. His aim was "to unite art and nature,"<sup>7</sup> a synthesis of perception and abstraction where the abstract is never pursued at the expense of sensation. He wanted to "redo Poussin after nature" and not to redo nature after Poussin.

His constantly shifting gaze led him to give each plane and shape its own culmination; it is pulled toward the picture plane giving a kind of flatness to the overall image, and allowing the eye to roam freely. There seems no privileged point of entry into a Cézanne painting; the interwoven whole hangs like a curtain, with the vanishing point no longer an overall dramatic center. The objects are extended in vertical and horizontal planes parallel to the picture plane and strong diagonal stresses, which serve to lead the eye by subtle devices such as *passage* and *repoussoir* into an imaginary picture space, are eschewed. Observation of a Cubist painting, such as Braque's *Still Life with Mandolin* (1909), will show how these multifarious receding planes have been deconstructed in a way that Cézanne would never have done, given his reverence for the "show which the Pater Omnipotens Aeternus Deus spreads out before our eyes."<sup>8</sup> The precarious slants often

seen in Cézanne's portraits and still lifes are also present, not so much to lead us into the picture but to be counterbalanced by other stresses on the picture plane, a feature that also formed a point of departure for the Cubists.

The complete reversal of Cézanne's intentions comes about not with the early Cubist paintings by Braque and Picasso, where a tenuous link with the subject is always retained, but with the paintings of Gris, Klee, and others.~. Whereas Cézanne imported a sense of abstract construction into the forms of nature, Gris started from the abstract and worked toward the natural. "Cézanne turns a bottle into a cylinder, but I begin with a cylinder and create an individual of a special type: I make a bottle—a particular bottle out of a cylinder."<sup>9</sup> The structural elements in Cézanne's work were seized upon by the early Cubists as a corrective to the formlessness of much Impressionist painting, illustrated by Braque's *La Roche-Guyon* (1909); but Cubism was in no sense a straightforward development of his overriding concern, which was a single-minded and dispassionate investigation into the nature of solid forms in space.

Wagner stands heir to the earlier romantic composers of the nineteenth century such as Liszt and Berlioz, in whose work we find strict tonality already undermined. and their preoccupation with "programme" music was an element inherited by Wagner. His need for musical continuity, motivated by the needs of the drama, hastened the chromaticism in his work and led him to coalesce successive moments into an endless transition. His narratives admit no closure or final resolution, and this led him toward the extensive use of the chromatic scale, with its suggestions of ambiguity, as opposed to the clearly defined structures of eighteenth-century classicism.

The paradigm here is his use of the dominant seventh chord, which Bach would have resolved to the tonic, giving the music a sense of finality and closure. By contrast, Wagner's conception of *Tristan and Isolde* was, in his own words, "a tale of endless yearning, longing, the bliss and wretchedness of love. ...A languishing forever renewing itself." The dominant chord in the key of A, whose resolution is postponed throughout the opera, emphasizes the sense of doubt and insecurity, and becomes "resolved" only in retrospect. The ways in which Wagner pushes at the bounds of tonality are complex:" however, his operas are still, despite their chromaticism, within the overall framework of tonality. *Die Walküre* begins and ends in C major, less radically innovative in this respect than Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, which starts in C minor but moves to C major. It is the perpetual duality between diatonic and chromatic, between light and dark emotion, that characterizes Wagner, and that lends to his music the perpetual state of "becoming." However, it was left to Schönberg (whose early work such as *Verklärte Nacht* exemplifies this Wagnerian duality) to radically expand tonal harmony in the pursuit of musical evolution.<sup>12</sup>

If the gradation of hues has proved an unreliable analogue to musical modulation, then, *if we persist*

in looking for one, the position is vacant for another feature of the visual language to emerge as a stronger candidate for the experience, or “shared human ground” of transition and movement. Perspective, as we have seen, is concerned with a position, which may be a fixed stance assumed by the spectator as in Dürer or it may be developed as in Cézanne, by virtue of the painter’s wavering eye level, to a shifting position in relation to the objects. Cézanne’s subtle tilts of perspective, the “fruiterer’s tip,” provided a point of departure for Cubism, rather than the direct use of color for modeling, which had already been achieved by Corot and Constable, but without abandoning the vanishing point. What Cézanne achieved in the course of remaining faithful to the phenomena of his studies was that experienced perspective is not a geometric or photographic one; our gaze wavers constantly, every inclination of the head causes a different alignment of objects, and every movement of the object creates minute changes in the visual field.

Perspective was the starting point chosen by David Hockney when he was commissioned to design the sets for *Tristan* in 1987, and the plurality of angles he achieved in them reflects the transition from key to key in the music.<sup>13</sup> If we can say that the key of C major is fairly close to the keys of C major or C minor, but far from those of B major or C<sup>#</sup> minor, then we have already entered, metaphorically, into a way of describing these keys in terms of place and space. In a classical painting, everything hinges on the vanishing point, as a tonal piece of music hinges on the tonic keynote. It is in this vanishing point, which shifts or disappears, that we find a more felicitous parallel to the tonal center that moves from place to place. The “home” is not a “home color for each thing depicted”<sup>14</sup> but the center of that thing, which Cézanne strove to express by the depiction of planes and which is tied to all the other “centers.” The means whereby he achieves this is certainly by drawing, or modeling, these planes with color, but *those modulations of color are nor themselves the “key” that shifts.* The musical key, like a color scheme, is something more pervasive, just as a new viewpoint in a painting adjusts our whole stance or position with regard to the subject. To press a visual analogy that hangs on the musical one would be to construct a painting that starts and returns to one viewpoint, by way of other angles, all in the course of the whole surface, or, alternatively, to create an image that moves through different color schemes.

As Turner remarks, we are perpetually intrigued by these faint intimations of likeness; but an analogy often looks promising, and then, like a stream in limestone country, disappears underground, perhaps to reappear again in an unexpected place. Perhaps we should be content, paraphrasing Blake, to “kiss the comparison as it flies” and not attempt to make it bind upon further generalities. In many ways, the problem resembles Wittgenstein’s notion of a concept as a

“complicated network of similarities, overlapping and criss-crossing.”<sup>15</sup> What we have in the arts is something far closer to a Wittgensteinian “fibre” where no continuous thread runs throughout, rather than anything more formal, such as the claim that eighteenth-century harmony is like local color. Seeing it instead as a web of exchange between all the facets – senses, feeling, and the technical means available to the various arts – gives us a wider picture, and, most importantly, it includes the abstract or formal qualities that lend themselves to both the technical means and the “universe of human feeling.”

Lastly, a point to be remembered by those who are intrigued by this complicated network of similarities amongst the arts is that whatever external influences seem to bear on artistic innovation, these innovations are made by those who are inside the art, who have assimilated the tradition, and who are primarily concerned with the problems and possibilities offered by the medium in question, together with the model, motif, theme, or idea that engages their minds. No amount of thinking about art should be a substitute for experiencing it; we must see and hear as well as think: yet an awareness of the complicated web of parallels to which I have drawn attention may well enrich that experience.<sup>16</sup>

1. Norman Turner. ‘Cézanne, Wagner, Modulation.’ *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56 (1998): 353.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 362.

3. It can be shown that the eye automatically compensates for prolonged exposure to any one color, by creating an “after image”. Look at a square of bright color for a few moments, and then either close the eyes, or look at a white surface: a square of is complementary color will appear as a retinal image. To a lesser extent, this also happens simultaneously.

4. Introduction to Gaétan Picon, *The Birth Of Modern Painting* (London: Tiger Books, 1991), p. 10.

5. Baudelaire, ‘The Universal Exhibition of 1855,’ in *Selected Writings on Art and Artists* trans. P. E. Charvet (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), p. 137.

6. Letter to Emile Bernard, 15 April 1904, Cited in *Cézanne by Himself* ed. Richard Kendall (London: Little, Brown & Co., 1992), p. 236.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 289.

8. Letter to Emile Bernard, 15 April 1904.

9. *L’Esprit Nouveau* 5 (1921): 533 - 534 English text in D. H. Kahnwiler. *Juan Gris* (New York: Alan Wofsy Fine Arts, 1947), p. 138.

10. Wagner’s program note for the performance of the Prelude in Paris, 25 January 1860.

11. See Deryck Cooke. *The Language of Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989). pp. 187 ff. for a detailed analysis of the *Tristan* chord.

12. This poses a comparison between Schönberg’s development of the 12-tone system in music and the evolution of abstraction in the visual arts by way of Gris and Klee. Unfortunately, it lies outside the scope of this reply.

13. David Hockney, *That’s the Way I see it* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993), p. 172.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 361.

15. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* trans. C. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1994) p. 32.

16. I am grateful to Professor Bob Sharpe for his interest and constructive criticism during the preparation of this paper.

## **Response to Elizabeth Haines**

The essay we are discussing is one part of a long, eight-part unpublished work on Cézanne. Much of this work is concerned with Cézanne's perspective, a topic many, including Haines, see as central to an understanding of the artist. With no way of knowing I have treated it elsewhere, she misses it. Ditto a full treatment of Cézanne and Cubism. In "Cézanne, Wagner," etc., this topic is mentioned only at the last, as an ending that discloses a fresh prospect, where I write that Cubism is 'reached by modulation of the historical sort, a rapid and in some respects retrograde progress of creative misunderstanding, from Cézanne's way with color back toward tonality and modeling. ...' This reversal of color does, in fact, promptly take place with the earliest Cubist paintings of Braque and Picasso. I otherwise agree with Haines's comments, but am uncertain if she is correcting me or merely dilating on my hint.

"Local color" is a well-defined, conventional feature of instruction in the visual arts. Keeping an eye on length, I assumed adequate familiarity on the part of readers, and merely said it is "the native color apart from the influence of lights, shadows, and reflected or neighboring hues." I have no quarrel with Haines's extended definition, which repeats the standard one, and would not have harmed my essay—would, perhaps, have helped it. Let hers replace mine; it comes to the same difference.

That "Wagner stands heir to the earlier romantic composers" is certainly so. Like a full-fledged definition of local color, this was an elaboration I went past. Unlike a definition of local color, it contributes nothing to my argument. I accept, too, "The ways in which Wagner pushes at the bounds of tonality are complex," but still assert his originality. This is a matter less of kind

than of degree. Harmonic progressions in Wagner are historically unusual *to a degree*. "It now seems to me, as Wagner himself put it, "that the finest and most profound feature of my art is the art of transition, for its entire texture consists of such transitions."<sup>1</sup>

Everything has to do with everything else, or so it seems in dealing with Cézanne, his era, the influences upon him, his place in the history of art, and the significance of his work for us, but everything cannot go into one essay. The one we are discussing is self-sufficient. It is neither about Cézanne and perspective, nor about the history of music leading up to Wagner, nor about the Cubists' response to Cézanne's involvement with nature, only about their response to his color. I must assert in mild protest that Haines lands on what is extraneous to my argument along with what belongs. I do not pretend, in this essay, to take up all aspects of Cézanne; I confine myself to one aspect only, that given in the title, "Cézanne, Wagner, Modulation."

Beyond these points, which may or may not be minor, stands a serious disagreement. Haines directs the reader's attention to the last two pages of my essay, where she finds "parallels that I finally draw." I would prefer the reader go to the first page, where I explicitly introduce my thesis, beginning: "Cézanne and Wagner both employ modulation, a structural means of crossing from one element of a work to another. Though their works are formally unlike, the meaning of modulation for both is that it embodies the transitional aspect of experience, the feeling of our attention shifting from here to there. The two sorts of modulation imply a shared human ground." Note that emphasis is on a common meaning, rather than of the respective formal techniques of the two arts, the comparison of which I am shy of here and throughout.

Expounding this thesis. I find a limited similarity between local color and eighteenth-century harmony in that both involve an aural or visual home, a locus around which variables are grouped, and a feeling of secure return and anchoring. Noticing that Wagner and Cézanne were alive at the same time, I further find a suggestive similarity between their respective kinds of modulation as to what those kinds of modulation signify. Color modulation in Cézanne, it bears repeating, is not a subsequent interpolation, invented by critics. He used the word, his application of it is consistent with the widespread use of musical terms to describe color at the time, but is also novel, and in some of his utterances he explicitly distinguishes what he is doing from the traditional modeling centered on local color. And one can see modulation plainly in his work. Not that he is indifferent to local color; he attacks it along different lines. Instead of dividing the elemental color of things into dark and light variations thereof, he adds one slight variation of hue to another. Summing hues, he totals an equivalent to local color. Or he marches color by color across a form and across its boundaries into neighboring forms, piling up changes of hue in extended passages that branch across the whole surface. Music does not do anything like this, it cannot, it is a different kind of animal. I repeat, my thrust is less that of one art's formal workings put be-side those of another than of what is mutually represented, the feeling of transition. If different arts represent feeling, each in its own respective form, in this ease it is a represented feeling of perceptual movement, of shifting our attention from one nexus to an-other, that Wagner and Cézanne share.

Haines rejects this comparison. To the extent she is willing to engage in such comparisons at all (and I fully appreciate her reservations), she wants to liken what she calls "color scheme," or the overall tint of the picture in its entirety, to tonality in music. Then, after discussing Wagner's harmony, she proposes doing away with color altogether and substituting perspective. In either case, she compares the formal techniques of the two arts, rather than a represented feeling we might gain from them, an approach quickly yielding tedious and unconvincing results, as Lawrence Gowing knew, and as she herself apparently understands. When she says, with emphasis, "*those modulations of color are not themselves the 'key' that shifts,*" she is not only remote from what I more cautiously propose but far gone in the tangle of sorting unlike materials and unlike ways of shaping them to expressive ends. It is an approach I explicitly reject. On page 361 I write, "one may speak of laws of color, one may speak, as [Charles] Blanc does, of color scales and color vibrations as equaling those of sound, one may speak of rules for constructing with color, derived

from this knowledge, but it does not follow, pace Blanc, that painting and music have the same formal logic.” True of color; true of space. The perspective of a painting cannot “start and return to one viewpoint” as in a musical progression because music and painting occupy time differently. All the elements of a painting are copresent, but the elements of music are present sequentially. The simultaneity of painting militates against our being able to leave a perspective viewpoint and return to it in the same way one leaves and returns to a tonic chord in music. We read the painting sequentially, yet all of it is always there. Perspective is comparable to music only in our generalized experience of visual and aural interval, or relative position, just as Cézanne’s color modulation is comparable to that of Wagner only in our generalized experience of sequential progression going on and on, from moment to moment, without unequivocal reference to a fixed base.

There is a problem about all this that does deserve mention, however. Meyer Schapiro has written of the tension between generalization and historical record.<sup>2</sup> Attempts to chronicle a theoretical worldview, in his example, only succeed in breaking it apart. The more thorough the exhumation of historical materials, the more scrupulously the reading of them, the more the purported *Weltanschauung* is shattered by philological contention. Theoretical unity falls to fact, generalization to its constituent details. This is a serious problem indeed. Is it the one Haines is reaching for but failing to grasp when she is troubled by what she sees as my inadequate account of Wagner’s predecessors, past developments with color, and the Cubist response to Cézanne? Perhaps she is made uneasy by the relationship, in my essay, between my generalizations and the histories of music and art. To this charge—if it is a charge she is making—I have already responded above, in my fourth paragraph.

Let me add that the tension admits of no resolution. If overview is undermined by detail, detail is meaningful only when subsumed to overview. Data require interpretation. One strives for a defensible accord.

Speaking of which, I am made uneasy by some of Haines’s statements. One, she likens the concerns of eighteenth-century Venetian painters to those of Cézanne and the Impressionists. But Monet, Sisley, Renoir, and especially Pissarro were much stimulated by a contemporary science of light, the described effects of which they were able to perceive in nature and try to render, about which the eighteenth-century Venetians could know nothing, as it came afterward. Guardi and Canaletto give wonderful examples, not of divided color, but of local color and modeling with lights and darks in the long-established way. Two, use of the phrase “picture plane” in connection with Cézanne is an anachronism to be guarded against or suitably qualified. He is unlikely to have thought in a way belonging more to 1950s New York than 1860s France, although he was certainly, on the evidence of his work, early and late, very aware of the surface, and of the integrity of the surface. Three, as Theodore Reff has pointed out, Cézanne’s famous words on the cylinder, sphere, and cone repeat stock advice given in how-to-paint books of the time.<sup>3</sup> The Cubists seized on them to advance their own ends, but we should take them with a grain of salt. Cézanne never renders things in his motifs as geometric solids.

I see no reason, on the basis of Haines’s response, to abandon my way of putting the relationship of Wagner to Cézanne, the interpretation I attach to it. To me, this interpretation resides in the musical and pictorial works at issue; I hear it and see it, it is pregnant with meaning, it signals change within the culture, a more alert awareness of how the questing mind drives forward from fixation to fixation. Yet her thinking is congenial. I find more harmony than dissonance in our respective views. She writes, “what Cézanne achieved in the course of remaining faithful to the phenomena of his studies was that experienced perspective is not a geometric or photographic one.” This is exactly my opinion; it states what my full essay is mostly about; it is a decidedly minority and outlying position relative to the Formalist orthodoxy of Erie Loran, Clement Greenberg, and William Rubin. So it seems she and I may be more in the same area of thought than otherwise.

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1. Quoted in Martin Bernstein and Martin Picker. *An Introduction to Music*, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1966), p. 369.

2. Meyer Schapiro. “The New Viennese School.” *The Art Bulletin* 18 (1936): 258-266.

3. Theodore Reff. “Painting and Theory in the Final Decade,” *Cézanne: The Late Work* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1977), p. 47.