

Freeland's *Art Theory*

Chapter 6 – “Cognition, Creation, Comprehension”

Chapter overview

- Chapter 6 discusses the broad topic of art's meaning and interpretation.
- Interpretation is the process through which we come to understand an artwork's meaning. In contemporary Western aesthetics, debates on interpretation are centered on the role of **authorial intention**.
- **Emotions** are often mentioned as an important part of meaning and value in art. The chapter discusses one theory that attempts to explain emotion's role in art, the **expression theory**. We shall look at some of the forms the theory may take, and the objections it faces.



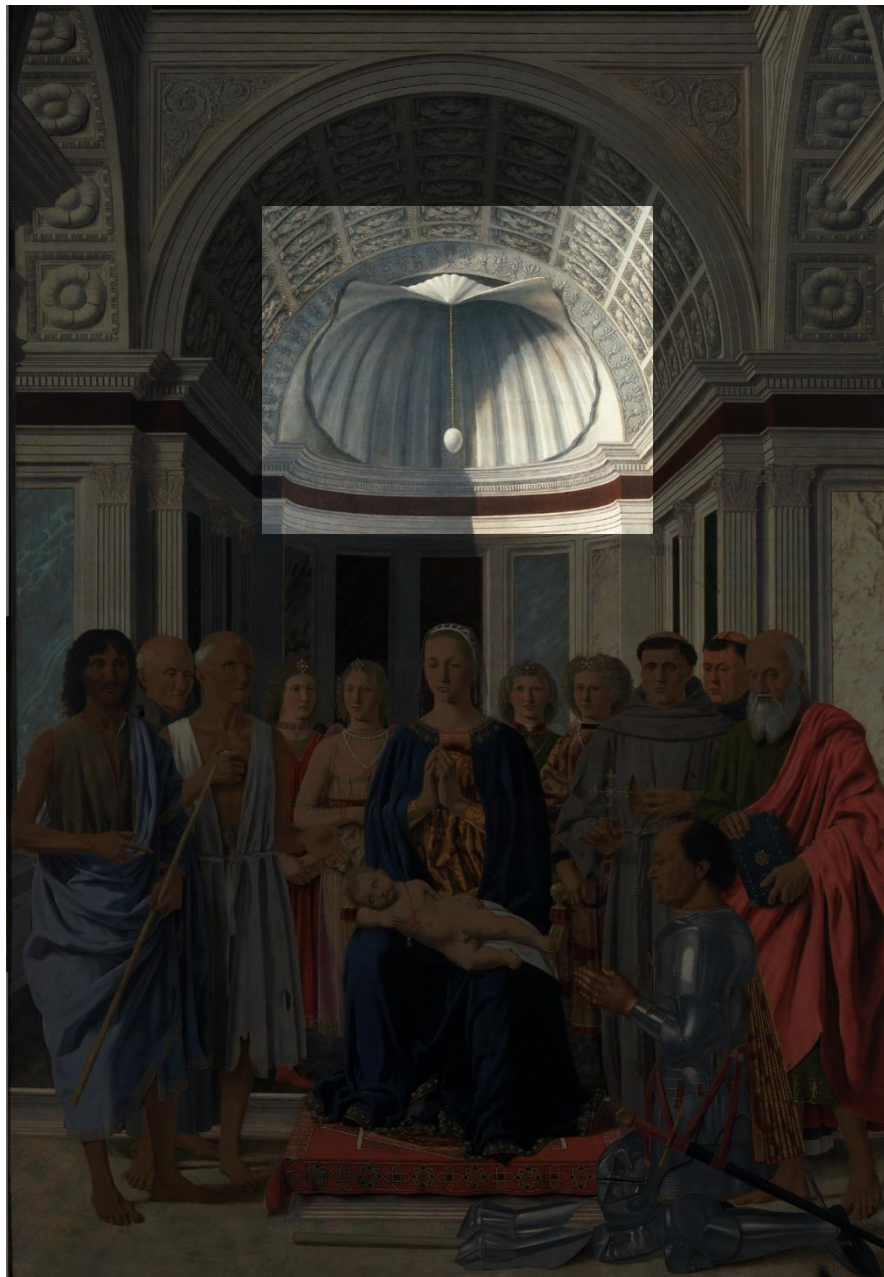
Ed Wood's *Plan 9 From Outer Space* (1959)

Interpretation of art

- Few artworks are immediately comprehensible in all of their significance. The process of understanding an artwork's meaning is **interpretation**.
- Interpretation may be **local**, when it concerns the meaning of a specific part of the artwork, or **global**, when it attempts to uncover the artwork's general meaning.
- The theories of interpretation we will examine normally discuss examples global interpretation, but they also attempt to account for local interpretation.



Piero della Francesca, *Pala Montefeltro* (1472-74)



Piero della Francesca, *Pala Montefeltro* (1472-74)

Anti-intentionalist views

- Anti-intentionalist theories of interpretation were first developed by literary theorists as a reaction to interpretations that focused excessively on the artist's biography.
- The idea that biographical information is irrelevant to interpretation gave rise to **New Criticism**, an approach to interpretation that was particularly prominent in the US and UK from the 1930s to the 50s.
- New Criticism considered artworks as **autonomous** entities, to be understood independently from any information that is external to them. This includes biographical details about the authors, and thus also the author's **intentions** regarding the work's meaning, purpose, or categorization.

The intentional fallacy

- According to anti-intentionalists, any appeal to authorial intention commits the **intentional fallacy** (意向谬误), which owes its name to a 1946 article by W. K. Wimsatt and M. C. Beardsley.
- But why is the intentional fallacy a fallacy, that is, a mistaken form of reasoning? Anti-intentionalists have various arguments. The most important one is the following.
- Either the author's intention is realized in the work, or it is not realized. If it is, then appeal to the author's intention is **unnecessary** (the work has the intended property, and we can grasp it without knowledge of the author's intention). If it is not, then appeal to the author's intention is **insufficient** (the work lacks the intended property, and knowledge of the author's intention won't confer that property to the artwork).

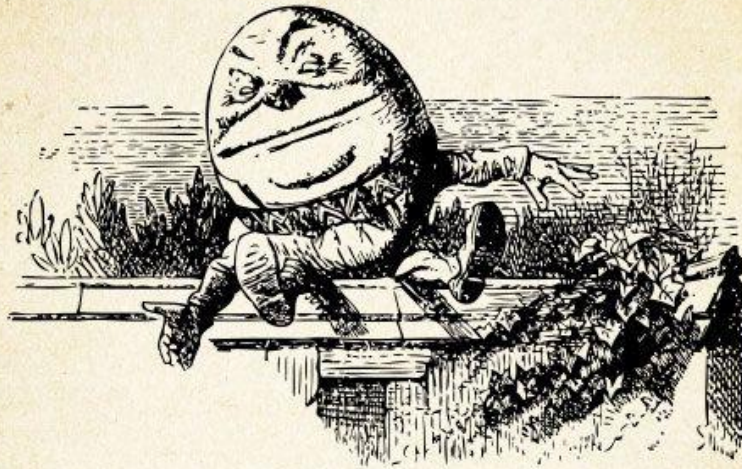
Intentionalist views

- Anti-intentionalism is at times called ‘conventionalism’, because it holds that an artwork’s meaning is determined by (literary, musical, painterly, etc.) **conventions**, rather than by the author’s intent.
- But conventions **underdetermine** the interpretation of an artwork. That is, given an artwork and a set of conventions, we might still be uncertain as to what the meaning of the work is. In these cases, we often appeal to the author’s intention.
- Because of cases such as the one just described, **intentionalists** argue that authorial intention is relevant to the interpretation of art.

Absolute intentionalism

- An intentionalist must avoid the radical position that considers an artwork's meaning to be entirely dependent on its author's intention.
- This view is called **absolute intentionalism**, and it is far less tenable than the opposing anti-intentionalist view, according to which an artwork's meaning is entirely dependent on conventions.
- The main problem for absolute intentionalism is that it is a form of **Humpty-Dumptyism**, that is, it is committed to the idea that the meaning of something (in this case, an artwork) is entirely dependent on its creator's intention. This does not seem a convincing view of meaning in other contexts, such as linguistic communication.

(Humpty-Dumpty is a character in Lewis Carroll's novel *Through the Looking-Glass*)



When I use a
word, it means just
what I choose it to
mean ~ neither
more, nor less.

Moderate intentionalism

- To avoid the problems of absolute intentionalism, intentionalists normally opt for a **moderate version** of the view. They will claim that intentions determine meaning so long as they are successfully realized by the work. When the author's intention is unsuccessful, meaning is determined instead by **convention** and **context**.
- Moderate intentionalism holds that we should interpret an artwork on the basis of its author's intentions, so long as these are **successful**. A difficult problem is to decide what it is for an intention to succeed. When can we say that a given intention was successfully realized by an artwork?

Successful intentions

- It is not enough for the intention to be **compatible** with the artwork, for many bizarre or irrelevant intentions an author could have will not explicitly clash with the work (that is, they will be compatible with it).
- An alternative adopts the stronger condition of **meshing**, which requires the intended meaning to mesh (i.e. be coherent with) the other elements of the work.
- Another possibility is that of appealing to audience **uptake**. An intention should be considered successful so long an **appropriately backgrounded** audience is more likely interpret the work in the intended way than in other ways. This is a stronger constraint on success than mere compatibility.

The expression theory of art

- The **expression theory** of art was first formulated by Romantic artists and intellectuals, although it is possible to find earlier statements of a similar view.
- The expression theory holds that the central purpose of art is the artist's **communication** of a particular experience (i.e., some kind of psychological state, such as a feeling) to an audience.
- On this view, an artwork is a tool that recreates in the viewer the psychological state that was experienced by the artist.

“ [...] Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind. In this mood successful composition generally begins, and in a mood similar to this it is carried on [...]”

W. Wordsworth, Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1802)

“To evoke in oneself a feeling one has once experienced and having evoked it in oneself then by means of movements, lines, colours, sounds, or forms expressed in words, so to transmit that feeling that others experience the same feeling—this is the activity of art.

Art is a human activity consisting in this, that one man consciously by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that others are infected by these feelings and also experience them.”

L. Tolstoy, *What is Art* (1897)