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AN ANALYSIS OF ISENBERG'S AESTHETIC THEORY  
AND ITS APPLICATION TO THE WORKS OF  
MONET AND SMOKEY

by

Tracee Elizabeth Gross

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree

of

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Aesthetics is a branch of philosophy, which attempts to define art using a set of purported characteristics that, when applied to particular pieces, will aid in making discriminations between art and non-art. Aesthetics also traditionally examines the creation, appreciation, and criticism of art. Theories of aesthetics are constructed to assist one in making judgments as to whether or not a piece is art or is beautiful. Ideally, theories serve two primary tasks. The first is to provide an explanation, which will aid in separating out those items not covered in the scope of the theory. Also, theories are used as a vehicle for prediction. Using theories, one can determine in advance whether a piece will be classified as art or beautiful under its formulation.

Much of the focus of aesthetics has been to locate one common element or property possessed by all art, which could be utilized to separate out those works which are not art. This notion is the doctrine of commonality. The doctrine of commonality presumes that the primary function of words is to name. Meanings of the words arise from the process of naming. If this is successful for such things as proper names it should also work for general terms as well. So, in order to find out about what is art, one must seek out the one component or property all art holds in common.

Numerous philosophers have incorporated the notion of the doctrine of commonality into their theories of aesthetics. Plato in Book X of the *Republic* contends that art is fundamentally imitation.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Jowett, trans., The Dialogues of Plato 4th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953) 27-37.

Plato argues that in the world the only real things are the forms. Objects in nature such as trees and flowers are essentially copies of the forms and in turn, art is just a copy of those copies. Another philosopher who relies heavily on the doctrine of commonality is R.G. Collingwood. For Collingwood, art consists of those pieces that express emotion.<sup>2</sup> If a piece is to be considered art it must be unplanned, spontaneous, and embody pure expression. This line of traditional aesthetics involves super criticism of the piece followed by the construction of a theory, which consists of a set of descriptive sentences. However, this narrowed focus yields a closed definition of art; it limits and restricts art to those things possessing an essential common element or property.

Unlike traditional aestheticians, Arnold Isenberg rejects the notion of a common element present in all art objects. He states that one is wasting time when trying to reveal law-like generalizations that would link factual observations to aesthetic judgments.<sup>3</sup> Isenberg's aesthetic theory tends to center on the employment of expression rather than description. Description invokes the incorporation of truth values, while expressions lack truth value.

For Isenberg, truth value is secondary with respect to aesthetic expression. Basically, when description is combined into the formation of theories virtually little is revealed about the piece. For example, let us say that an individual remarks that Van Gogh's

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<sup>2</sup> R.G. Collingwood, "Art as the Expression of Emotion," The Principles of Art (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1938) 96-118

<sup>3</sup> Arnold Isenberg, "Critical Communication," Philosophical Review July 1949: 330-344.

painting *The Starry Night* is a good painting. In a descriptive statement such as this not very much information about the piece is disclosed. The individual, who receives this information, does not know what elements bestow the piece with that classification. On the other hand, using expressions (instead of simply stating "it is a good painting") evinces and directs one's attention to the ineffable qualities that make it good. As a result, expression is by far more effective in probing into the piece and discovering its success or failure. All in all, appropriateness and inappropriateness are the measures of effective aesthetic discourse.

Isenberg notes that the real difficulties in aesthetics arise from language confusions. In traditional aesthetics, object language, language used to talk about objects; it is employed in order for one to communicate about a work of art. Object language is normally implemented by critics who study art. The incorporation of object language is evident when a critic discusses a piece. Isenberg suggests though that proper aesthetics use meta-language. Meta-language is language used to talk about language. So, instead of studying art one would study the language of criticism. Therefore, rather than labeling a piece as expressive one would use of a meta-language to unravel what it means for a piece to be expressive. Employing this technique will allow one to appraise critical communication about an art object.

Isenberg suggests that in aesthetic conversation one can be classified an expert when examining a work of art. Isenberg has outlined a method by which one can settle issues of taste. First, a value judgment must be made by the critic with respect to the work

of art. The critic must then be able to express reasons, regarding the aesthetic quality, in support of the value judgment. However, expressing reasons as to the aesthetic quality is not enough. A critic must be able to direct the attention of another viewer to the qualities she is emphasizing. Ultimately, critics are in "the business of pointing."<sup>4</sup> They use pointing to steer our view to a particular aspect of the piece in order to get us to "perceive" some features of the piece the critic has apprehended.

It is important to note a key difference here between perceiving an aspect of a piece and merely sensing. With sensing, one views a piece as flat; it only allows one to view that piece as a painting and nothing else. One is just receiving raw data and basic images about the piece when sensing. Unlike sensing, perceiving tends to peer deeper into the piece rather than focusing on the surface image. Perceiving tends to produce an element of conceptual change; it allows one to view the piece as more than just a flat visual image. Moreover, it produces a shift in the attitude of the observer. Rather than just viewing a piece as a painting, one is able to synthesize and interpret the information from the senses and then is able to see the piece in other ways.

However, in order for viable and meaningful criticism to occur, the piece being criticized must be present. This gives the critic access to the piece while stating the reasons, with regards to its aesthetic quality, in support of the value judgment. Discussion of

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<sup>4</sup> Marcia Muelder Eaton, Basic Issues in Aesthetics (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1988) 116.

different pieces needs to be concrete, which is only achieved when the piece is present.

For Isenberg, there are no norms in aesthetics. There are no rules or laws to govern the direction or scope of aesthetics. In traditional aesthetics, art is defined and limited in its potential to those pieces having a particular component. However, with the aesthetics and techniques for criticism set forth by Isenberg, art can be almost anything provided the critic can produce reasons to pinpoint aesthetic quality.

The goal Isenberg is striving to reach with this method of criticism is *sameness of vision*. The critic must be able to get another observer of the piece to perceive certain aspects of the piece that the critic has seen. Pointing to aspects of the piece is not done in order for the critic to get one to believe it is art or it is beautiful, but rather as a means for one to better perceive these features.<sup>5</sup> The other individual does not necessarily have to agree with the critic's classification of the piece; he or she only has to share the same perception of the piece that the critic is trying to convey.

To accomplish this shared perception between the critic and the onlooker, the critic must direct and guide the attention of the individual to the specific aspects of the piece such as the feeling of movement that is revealed, any symbolism that may be present, sharp contrasts, obvious symmetry, or distorted images. In order to guide an individual's attention to the aspect of the piece that the critic perceives, the critic must employ a number of techniques such

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<sup>5</sup> Marcia Muelder Eaton, *Aesthetics and The Good Life* (London: Associated University Press, 1989) 132.

as expressive language or physical gestures. The effectiveness of the techniques employed to generate *sameness of vision* will depend on the observer's reaction to the critic's actions.

Some philosophers have recognized possible limitations on Isenberg's theory. William G. Lycan and Peter K. Machamer in particular note a possible obstacle in its application. The focus of a critic's responsibility is to secure a perception on the part of the individual that the critic has already perceived about the piece in question. Lycan and Machamer argue that it would be extremely difficult for a critic to determine when the individual had perceived the precise aspect the critic had. The critic is striving for a specific perception on the part of the individual and not just any perception. Since perceptions are private experiences held by each individual, it will be difficult to determine with any sort of accuracy whether or not the individual's perception equals or nears that of the critics.<sup>6</sup> I, as the critic, know with absolute certainty those elements which make the painting art. However, it is difficult for me to be absolutely sure that the other individual is seeing the same aspects I do; they may think they understand what I am trying to reveal yet they may be totally off the point.

To overcome this obstacle, both the critic and the individual must cooperate with one another. The individual, when in doubt about a particular point, must demand clarification or ask for more concrete reasons in support of the value judgment made. The critic

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<sup>6</sup> William C. Lycan and Peter K. Machamer, "Theory of Critical Reason," Language and Aesthetics, ed. B.R. Tilghman (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1973) 87-112.

then must modify her approach in attempting to create *sameness of vision* , by choosing different words or gestures to convey the point across more effectively. Ultimately, the outward expressions made by the individual will be of tremendous benefit to the critic. They will yield clues as to how the critic should alter her course. If the critic and the individual work together the likelihood of misinterpretation will be significantly reduced.

In attempting to apply Isenberg's method of criticism to a particular piece, the piece must be present in order for viable criticism to occur. Included in Appendix A are two paintings that will be examined using Isenberg's method. With each painting I, as the critic, will strive for *sameness of vision* with the audience. This task proves quite difficult, since I am unable to witness the reaction of the audience. Therefore, I must assume the audience perceives and understands the indicators I am using. Had I been able to witness the reaction of the audience, I would have been able to change my approach in attempting to relay my message across accordingly.

The first piece to be scrutinized is titled *Serious Ramifications*.<sup>7</sup> The most striking feature of this painting is its obvious symmetry. The symmetry coupled with the interesting pattern of line qualities yields a feeling of movement which keeps one's eyes continually moving across the entire piece rather than focusing on a single area or element. The artist used colors that complement one another, however, there are a few hints of contrasting color which intermingle

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<sup>7</sup> Heather Busch and Burton Silver, Why Cats Paint: A Theory of Feline Aesthetics (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 1994) 60.

with the dominant blue. This splash of color tends to create an abstract image of confusion thereby adding an element of mystery and intrigue to the painting.

The piece is original and innovative; it is not a replica of something already existing in nature. The painting retains some structure and form but not enough for one to be able to easily distinguish what is being represented. The painting challenges one's imagination by carefully disguising and hiding the form or forms being portrayed. The painting allows one to explore endless possibilities as to its identity. Even though the piece does not reflect some definite object outright does not remove it from the possibility of being a work of art.

However, when one discovers that the painting was done by a cat named Smokey, one's view of the painting takes a drastic turn. Suddenly, the piece goes from the status of art to nothing but junk when the source of the painting is revealed. Many would feel that if *Serious Ramifications* was created by a human it could enjoy the classification of a work of art. However, since it was generated by an animal it cannot share the same title; it may even be detrimental to the work of many talented artists.

Once the artist is revealed it becomes increasingly difficult for a critic to convince one of the qualities that the painting possesses. After this information is revealed, the audience, instead of looking at the piece objectively, brings with them all of their prejudices, biases, and beliefs. This clouds their ability to view the aspects of the piece the critic expresses. The fact that the artist is an animal does not mean that it is incapable of producing a work of art. Many people

would classify this painting as non-art because almost anyone could produce a piece such as this. However, technical training is not an essential or necessary component in order for a piece to be considered art. Likewise, talent for this type of production is also not a requirement. The fact that a cat created this piece lends support to its intelligence level. Anyone could attend an art class in order to learn how to draw or paint, but this animal did not have any sort of training, yet she was able to produce a picture such as this. To many the painting is not symbolic, but it may not be symbolic to us because we are not thinking on the cat's level to be able to see what it represents or portrays.

*Spring Meadow* by Claude Monet is a good representation of a work that many would classify as art without much analysis of the piece.<sup>8</sup> When one even hears mention of Monet they automatically associate him with art, with no questions asked or even a view of his work. The first thing that is evident of this piece is that one is able to decipher what it represents with relative ease. It is representative of a scene out of nature, however, with the various colors and different textures embodied in the piece, Monet is able to take an ordinary scene and make it inventive.

Overall the painting is very pleasing to the senses, because of the use of soft soothing colors as green, purple, and blue. The brilliant pastel colors also aid in bringing to life the light and birth of spring that Monet is attempting to transmit. The intricate color patterns coupled with the rapid, sketchy brush strokes used to create

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<sup>8</sup> Paul Hayes Tucker, Monet in the 90's (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) 164.

them are symbolic of the complexity that exists in nature. A pattern such as this is not easily created, it takes lots of talent to get the colors working together to create such a complex inter-working. The blending of the colors also adds to the soothing nature of the painting which helps to create a feeling of peace and serenity.

Present in the painting is one focal point, the two trees. The stark tree branches help to direct one's attention right on the trees before they see anything else. The vertical lines aid in moving one's eyes to the top of the painting where they are held for a time. It is only later that one notices the other aspects that are prevalent. The rough texture of the foreground assists in adding depth to the overall piece allowing it to stand out more effectively.

To ensure successful criticism, three elements must be relied on. First and foremost, the specific piece being evaluated must be present. Pointing to specific aspects of the piece proves difficult when neither party has access to the piece. Secondly, the critic must possess a degree of verbal agility. A critic must be skilled in her communication techniques in order to convey to the audience those aspects, both effectively and convincingly, she would like them to perceive. Finally, a receptive audience is mandatory for criticism to succeed. If the audience ignores the critic in any way, she is doomed to failure; she will be unable to point out the aesthetic aspects of the piece. Moreover, the audience must remain open minded; it would be exceedingly difficult for the critic to create *sameness of vision* with onlookers who carry with them numerous prejudices and biases. Also, both the critic and the audience must be willing to work together and cooperate with one another. That is the only way

one can be absolutely sure that each is perceiving the same aspect as the other. All of these are required for *sameness of vision* to be achieved. Criticism will lead to a better experience on the part of the observer; it may reveal an aspect of the piece that was never noticed before. Through criticism one is able to gain a better appreciation and understanding not only for a particular piece but also for art as a whole.

Many aesthetic theories, especially those which search for one common element present in all objects, are extremely limiting and have bound the hands of not only the art pieces themselves, but also those who create them. Under their formulation only certain pieces can be art. Isenberg is a refreshing voice in an area that has been dominated by rigid and restrictive theories. Isenberg's *sameness of vision* is like the light at the end of a tunnel, offering new hope in the arena of aesthetics. It allows for art to be almost anything as long as one is able to get others to perceive aspects of the piece they perceive. With this method even a piece done by a cat can be art as long as one is able to support their value judgment with directions that focus on the aesthetic quality of the piece.

# Appendix A



Serious Ramifications

Smokey



Spring Meadow

Claude Monet