

The affordances of art: the role of the individual and the case of literature

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Adaptive Behavior

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Abstract

This short note addresses the question whether Rietveld's account of visual arts and adaptive behaviour be extended to literature.

Keywords

Erik Rietveld, adaptive behaviour, literature

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Erik Rietveld's inaugural lecture gives an exciting and inspiring analysis of how the kind of visual art that he makes, together with his brother Ronald Rietveld, opens up new meanings, new action possibilities and new practices. The examples that he discusses constitute convincing arguments for the important role that art can play in bringing about behavioural change.

The lecture is stimulating and thought-provoking. In this short note, I will discuss one question that Rietveld's analysis raises (at least for me), and follow up on that by speculating about its extension to other forms of art. The two issues are, loosely, connected, as I hope will become clear.

Visual art is able, Rietveld claims, to 'open up new meanings', stating that artists 'are really good at exploring new territories and possibilities'. This point is amply illustrated by the examples in the text. However, one question is not discussed explicitly, as far as I can see, and that concerns the nature of these new meanings. To put it rather crudely, Are these new meanings discovered? Or are they constructed? Many of the wordings Rietveld uses suggest the former: 'the layers of meaning our artworks can open-up', 'sedimented layers of meaning'. Sometimes, a more constructive view is suggested: 'People with different interests will have different experiences of the meaning of this artwork'. But note that the multiplicity concerns *experiences* of meaning, not the meaning itself, which, it seems, is assumed to exist independently.

Why is this important? One reason relates to the constraints within which art operates. The making of the kind of visual art that Rietveld discusses is obviously constrained by physical and biological laws, and that

sets it apart from other forms of art, including other forms of visual art. (One can draw Escher-like 'impossible' staircases, but one cannot construct them.) This is, on one hand, a limitation; on the other hand, it is what makes this art work. For example, the fact that people can concretely interact with an installation, such as *The End of Sitting*, is essential for its impact. (But one would not want, say, a Rothko painting to have impact in the same way.)

This feature of 'RAAAF art', if I may coin that term, aligns with the view that meaning is there. It is to be discovered, 'opened up'. This means that people are not completely passive recipients. Their interaction with a work of art is necessary to bring the discovery about. But there is a strong suggestion that the possible meanings are somehow anchored in the environment, even when we acknowledge that the environment is partly shaped by human action (as is obvious if we limit the environment to the works of art as such).

This kind of art thus operates within physical, biological and perhaps even some basic psychological constraints. That leads to a more general reason for asking the question whether meanings are discovered or constructed. Is all meaning constrained in this way? Or is art (also) concerned with meanings that transcend such

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boundaries and that, at least partly, originate, not in the environment, but in the individual?

The possibility of new meanings being constructed rather than discovered raises another question, viz., that of the relationship between individual and community. The romantic picture of the artist as a lone wolf, the genius that sees what others cannot, has long lost its appeal. Nevertheless, the question of novelty, that is, the question how it is that individuals can bring about change in meaning, by constructing new concepts, producing new forms of art and formulating new views, is still there. Emphasis on the embeddedness of the individual in its socio-material environment might make us lose sight of the question how, and to what extent, individuals may transcend those boundaries.

Practice-theoretician Theodore Schatzki, in his seminal book *Social Practices*, is concerned with novelty in a broad sense. He, too, emphasises that embeddedness in the socio-material environment is a precondition for novelty: 'Of course, it is only from the vantage point afforded by participation in a sociocultural form of life that novelty appears as such and thereby differentiates itself from the foreign and insane' (Schatzki, 1996, p. 68). Elsewhere, he uses the term '(being) one of us' to indicate this condition. Thus, his 'sociocultural form of life' also involves physical and biological constraints.

However, Schatzki clearly thinks of meaning as being primarily constructed, rather than discovered, and he acknowledges the possibility of an individual creating new meanings. He illustrates this take on novelty by discussing cases of individuals that create new meanings in ethics and religion, in the arts, in science and in everyday life. Thus, Schatzki's approach is different from Rietveld's in allowing more room for individual-initiated novelty. The constraints are there to guarantee intelligibility: venturing too far from the community's shared conceptions turns novelty into insanity; innovators need to remain 'one of us'. So, like Rietveld, Schatzki acknowledges the embeddedness of the individual in a socio-cultural-material environment as an enabling condition. In that respect, the differences are gradual, but with regard to the ontological source of meaning, there is a definite shift.

Schatzki's approach does raise questions. Does the appeal to the 'one of us' condition really help explaining when and how new meanings can be produced? Note that a meaning can be new in (at least) two senses: for the community that has to interpret it and for the individual that produces it. Now it seems that an individual that produces a new meaning in some sense understands it. But if they are one of us, then how can we fail to understand it as well? But if that is so, to what extent is the new meaning really a new meaning? In other words, the problem of new meanings turns around the relationship between individual and community: How much distance can there be between an individual and the community that constitutes its identity? Two factors

certainly play a role here: the individual body, viewed as a spatiotemporal object, and the history of the individual. Both are related to, and partly determined by, the community, but they are still in some sense private, at least in the sense of being individuated entities.

The tension between the individual and the community that Schatzki addresses brings me to the second point I would like to discuss. Interestingly, Schatzki's phrase 'one of us' plays a key role in Joseph Conrad's novel *Lord Jim*. It is used by the narrator, Marlow, to describe the main character, Jim, implicating that his actions – viz., abandoning a sinking ship on which he serves as first mate before saving its passengers – are relevant to 'us', that is, to us as outsiders who wonder why Jim acted the way he did, perhaps silently assuming that we would have done differently, and better. When we question Jim's behaviour, we are like people trying to figure out the implicatures of an utterance that somehow seems out of key: What does it mean? A description does not satisfy us because it lacks sense, it does not cohere with what we think is reasonable, or adequate. But Jim being 'one of us', there must be a way of interpreting what he did that *does* have meaning, a meaning that we can relate to. Thus, the novel invites us to construct a framework within which what seems at first sight unintelligible, nonsensical, incomprehensible, will make sense.

This illustrates the power of literature as an art form to raise such questions and thus function as a source for meaning creation. This is widely acknowledged, of course: the close connection between literature and ethics has been pointed out and discussed from Aristotle to contemporary authors such as Cora Diamond, Stanley Cavell, Martha Nussbaum, Hans-Georg Gadamer and many others (Cf., Korthals Altes & Meretoja, 2018 for a recent overview). In the present context, it is interesting to compare literature with visual art from this perspective.

What in literature drives this process of meaning creation is not the plot, that is, the events and people depicted in a novel or story. One could very well know exactly what *À la recherche du temps perdu* is all about, be able to list its characters, their relationships, the various places in which they reside, the conversations they have and so on, without actually getting the point. It is only the actually reading that does that. Poetry is an even better example: except perhaps for some epic poetry, there is no point in describing what a poem is about; it is really all about reading it. (This point is driven home forcefully by Wittgenstein (1978) in the fourth of his 'Lectures on aesthetics'.) Literature has impact through the experience of reading, and that differentiates literary works from philosophical and scientific works.

This, it seems, is something that all forms of art have in common. Their real impact, their potential to change, is driven by an individual's actual experience of

the work of art. But the role of the individual is not the same in each case. Rietveld emphasises the individual's active engagement as a precondition for their discovery of new meanings. But we also noted that there are substantial constraints, of a physical, biological and psychological nature. One could say that RAAAF art works the way it does because of these constraints and that the changes it brings about are intrinsically tied to the interactions between the individual and the environment, thus constrained.

Now the question is whether literature leads to adaptive behaviour in the same sense and in the same way. Of course, its behavioural changes take place at a high level of complexity, but the Rietveld framework is able to cover that, as is argued in Rietveld and Kiverstein's 'A rich landscape of affordances' (Rietveld & Kiverstein, 2014). However, the changes that literature brings about differ from those of RAAAF art. There is no change in the environment, either as stimulus or as response. The change is initially located in the individual itself, and it may very well remain restricted to the individual. Whatever change in behaviour this leads to, the adaptation is not to the (changed) environment, but to the change in the individual. That changed behaviour may include different attitudes towards the environment, but it is not an adaption to any changes in that environment.

The environment plays a different role: it is not what prompts the changed behaviour, it is not an agent and it need not be involved as a recipient.

Thus, literature appears to be an art form in which change is first and foremost the result of the initiative of the individual.

That the individual has a more active role in literature than in other forms of art is also due to the fact that literature is less constrained. As we saw, RAAAF art works because various constraints determine a specific space of possibilities. In literature, many of these constraints (though not all, of course) are missing. Thus, the environment that literature creates leaves a much larger space of possible meanings, and thus shifts agency in the creation of meaning more towards the

individual reader, and thus makes meaning more a matter of construction than of discovery.

These admittedly sketchy remarks suggest that we are dealing with a continuum of cases. Rietveld's analysis provides profound insights into a particular position on that continuum. But it does more than that: it also provides the conceptual tools to analyse other instantiations of this general phenomenon. And that is another reason why the analysis is so worthwhile.

Author's note

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