The Aesthetic Relevance of Iconicity in the Visual Arts

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Abstract: Traditional attempts to define the concept of "art" has frequently meant finding their core characteristics or necessary and jointly sufficient conditions. Especially mimetic and formalist theories have had numerous proponents, arguing for the aesthetic relevance of iconicity or of formal aspects, respectively. In this paper, some basic tenets and problems of these approaches, most notably their essentialist biases, will be discussed. I shall put forward a moderate defense of the aesthetic relevance of mimetic or iconic features in the visual arts. Hereby, also studies from experimental aesthetics will be considered.

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I. Iconology – A Quest for Meaning

Within art history, iconological methods of interpretation, such as developed by e.g., Erwin Panofsky, are well-known and prominent (cf. Panofsky, 1962). An iconological analysis should take several meaning levels of visual artworks into consideration. First, we have a *pre-iconographic* level, consisting of the identification of forms, i.e., configurations of lines, colour, etc., which may be identifiable as depictions of human beings, animals, natural or artificial objects, and so forth. Additionally, also the identification of gestures, expressive qualities, and simple actions would belong to this level. A second interpretative stage - the *iconographical* analysis - attempts to identify the subject matter or the theme of the artwork. Hereby, the identity of the depicted agents might be established (e.g., Christ) or maybe abstract concepts (e.g., the Trinity) having certain attributes and would, if necessary, include some reference to relevant myths or tales (e.g., the Crucifixion or the Passion of Christ). The first level considers visual configurations as iconic signs, i.e., based on their visual resemblance to something else, which do not presuppose any specific knowledge for their identification. The second one examines pictures based on pictorial conventions, visual codes, and symbolic meaning. Last, a third - *iconological* - level of interpretation would interpret the artwork as symptomatic of a cultural environment or world view, that is, formulate statements implied by the work in this respect, its *intrinsic meaning*. While the first two levels of interpretation are supposed to have a rather descriptive and relatively straightforward character, the iconological stage involves deeper reflection and so-called synthetic intuition.

Although iconographical and iconological methods have been influential in art history, they have by no means been uncontested. For example, its applicability to art before or after the Renaissance (which to a considerable extent was Panofsky's main focus of interest) has been questioned (Camille, 1993). Further, it has sometimes been argued that this approach generally provides a too narrow account of artworks because of its tendency to focus on their meaning aspects, hence reducing them to something like verbal messages and thus neglecting their formal or expressive qualities. As the art historian Otto Pächt wrote,

> [One]...treats the picture or work of art as if it were an emblematic mosaic, a pictorial writing...Art is seen as a procedure...for wrapping certain messages for the purpose of transportation...The task of the art historian...is then to remove the kernel from the shell... For this way of thinking the ranking of the artwork is inseparably connected with the value and the content of the message which it transports. Art is here...a means for achieving some ends, not an end in itself, and could in principle, when its task has been accomplished,..be dismissed (Pächt, 1977: 355, my transl.).

Still, iconological analyses as such do not necessarily have to disregard such qualities. The pre-iconographical level would, at least partly, permit descriptions of formal and expressive qualities of artworks, apart from their iconic sign functions. Moreover, numerous examples could be mentioned where Panofsky himself, in specific analyses of artworks, has given considerable attention to their formal and expressive qualities (cf. Holly, 1984: 165-167). As he himself noted, 'in the case of a work of art, the interest in the idea is balanced, and may even be eclipsed, by an interest in form' (Panofsky, 1955: 12). Nevertheless, Pächt is certainly right in pointing out the risks which one-sided accounts of solely referential, iconic, or (implied) propositional meaning functions of artworks might entail.

II. Iconicity, Denotation, and Exemplification

Nonetheless, there is no doubt that the meaning aspects of art throughout history have been considered to be of utmost significance, and iconological approaches are indeed essential for a comprehensive understanding of numerous artworks. Yet, attempts to describe and to interpret visual works of art is, for natural reasons, faced with numerous obstacles, not least concerning difficulties of translation between pictorial and verbal media. Their interpretative relationship is by no means uncomplicated, despite any intuitive conviction according to which pictorial meaning might be "spelled" out, or even replaced, by verbal expressions. One partial explanation of that assumption can probably be found in the common-sense view on the nature of meaning as the *referential* function of signs, whether pictorial or verbal. According to such referential, denotational, or "pictorial" theories of meaning, signs exist on an ontologically seen secondary level compared to the primary level constituted by the "world objects"; both pictures and words can share the same meaning if they refer to the same worldly aspects or to the same "things-in-themselves". Such a view does not only seem to be intuitively plausible, but comparable ideas have likewisely been systematized and elaborated by various language philosophers. For example, Ludwig Wittgenstein (1984) articulated a "picture theory" of meaning in his early work "Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus" from 1922 (which he, however, later being in his work "Philosophical Investigations" from 1953, which proposed a use-based theory of meaning). Nowadays, verbal signs are frequently considered to be meaningful due to *conventional* or *functional* relations, while mimetic signs are characterized as being *visually* and *naturally similar* to certain perceptual aspects of the world. Charles Saunders Peirce's well-known distinction between symbolic and iconic signs could exemplify such a view. According to Peirce, symbols depend on habitual and conventional

association (e.g., Peirce, 1931–58, 2.292, 2.297, 1.369), while icons (which, however, not necessarily have to be visual) are based on perceived resemblance or likeness (ibid., 2.247, 2.279, 2.299).

These meaning theoretical positions have, not surprisingly, been widely discussed among scholars concerned with the nature of language and/or the arts (see e.g., Martinich & Solsa, 2013; Hermerén, 1966). When it comes to pictorial signs, the notion of similarity as the decisive link between pictorial sign and the world has been much debated. During the last few decades, the idea that pictorial representation somehow depends on (natural) resemblance has been disputed, and various art theorists have suggested that the experienced relationship of similarity between pictorial signifiers and the signified objects is wholly dependent on cultural and historical frameworks, internalized codes, and/or habits of representation. Indeed, mimetic (or iconic) pictures have been claimed to be conventionalized signs, more or less equivalent to linguistic ones. Some of the most well-known adherents of this position – which might be called pictorial conventionalism – have been, for instance, Nelson Goodman (1976), Umberto Eco (1976), and Norman Bryson (1983). The common-sense view that visual representation presupposes a correspondence between picture and object in terms of (natural) similarity is explicitly denied. Especially the philosopher Nelson Goodman's intricate semiotic analysis (1976), according to which pictorial representation should be seen as a special form of denotation, dependent on conventions and habits, has received considerable attention. In the present context, I shall not be concerned with a detailed discussion of the arguments used in support of or against conventionalist positions. Suffice to say that numerous arguments put forward by radical conventionalists are based on somewhat artificially constructed examples, while empirical evidence from disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, or psychology is largely omitted. Indeed, several empirical studies, including cross-cultural ones, suggest that pictorial conventionalism in its most radical forms is not tenable. Although cultural frameworks certainly influence how pictorial iconicity becomes manifested and perceived, this does not mean that anything goes; the perception of visual resemblance appears often to occur quite spontaneously, with remarkable historical and universal stability (for fuller discussions, cf. Ranta, 2000: 90–101; Sonesson, 1989: 220–251).

We may note, though, that pictorial signs, perhaps in a more palpable way than verbal ones, often deploy other forms of reference, where perhaps the most characteristic, as Goodman more convincingly has argued, is *exemplification*. This means that works of art, such as pictures and sculptures, not only have a referential or denotative function, but they typically seem to point to some of their own properties as well, that is, they are to some extent *self-referential*. As to the first referential function, works of art are *about* something (e.g., about the external world, the artist's world view, but also about other works of art), they have a meaning. Pictures of Napoleon as an emperor or as a child respectively, refer both to a specific person and have this denotational meaning in common. At the same time, they direct our attention to their style, to their way of embodying or *expressing* the content, and to the features they possess (cf. also Danto, 1981). Exemplification is the converse of denotation and differs in direction (Goodman, 1976: 50); a picture may exemplify a predicate or *label*, such as "being an emperor" or "being a child"; these labels then denote the relevant properties of the pictures in question. Thus, as Goodman put it, pictures may be regarded as *samples* of those predicates or labels which are applicable to the properties which they possess (Goodman, 1976: 54). In a

metaphorical sense, pictures may also express (i.e., exemplify) emotional properties, such as sadness or gaiety, although these predicates usually apply to conscious beings instead of inanimate objects.

Not all signs, whether verbal or pictorial, put emphasis on exemplification or expressive qualities. We might regard the statement "Napoleon was an emperor" simply as a descriptive assertion (although we might say that it exemplifies the label "descriptive"). Likewise, diagrams or x-ray pictures are usually devoid of expressiveness. But in the visual arts, *what* is said seems to be highly dependent on *how* it is said, and the latter has sometimes been claimed to be essential for an artwork's aesthetic value and even its status as art.

III. Formalism and Aesthetic Judgments

Accordingly, in contradistinction to mimetic theories of art, formalist theories focus on pictorial art as just visual arrangements, independent from its meaning aspects. One of the first approaches on these lines was elaborated by Immanuel Kant (1799). According to Kant, only the formal aspects of art, i.e., its perceivable shape, structure, rhythm, or visual arrangement in general, should be considered when making aesthetic judgments.[1] An artwork's iconic or otherwise referential connection to external objects, as well as these objects' very existence or utilitarian value, are regarded as irrelevant. Genuine aesthetic judgments are thus *disinterested* in that regard and based on some kind of universalizable pleasure obtained from art's formal qualities. During the twentieth century, hedonic-formalist views on art gained further supporters among Anglo-American art theorists, such as Clive Bell, Roger Fry, Clement Greenberg, and, to some extent, Monroe Beardsley (Bell, 1914; Fry, 1920; Greenberg, [1961] 1984; Beardsley, 1970). As to Bell, the crucial feature defining visual works of art is so-called *significant form*, i.e., the arresting arrangement of lines, colors, shapes, etc., which arouse our aesthetic emotions. Any referential or representational content is irrelevant to its status as an artwork or its aesthetic value, that is,

> "Descriptive Painting" … in which forms are used not as objects of emotion, but as means of…conveying information. Portraits of psychological and historical value, topographical works, pictures that tell stories and suggest situations, illustrations of all sorts, belong to this class. Of course, many descriptive pictures possess… formal significance, and are therefore works of art: but many more do not. They interest us; they may move us too in a hundred different ways, but they do not move us aesthetically. According to my hypothesis they are not works of art (Bell, 1914: 16-17).

A number of objections can be raised against Bell's proposal, most notably perhaps that it is based on a circular definition: significant form is defined with reference to aesthetic emotion and vice versa (cf. Beardsley, 1958: 298). These concepts thus seem to be devoid of any informative content.[2] And how should we distinguish other kinds of emotions from genuine aesthetic ones? Moreover, the rejection of all

[1] However, sensible aspects such as color or tone are to a lesser extent considered to be 'proper objects' of aesthetic judgments (cf. Young, 2021: 113).

[2] For an attempt to resurrect some aspects of Bell's concept of significant form, see, however, McLaughlin (1977).

representational content as aesthetically irrelevant seems to be rather counter-intuitive and elitist. Should indeed (probably most) beholders' interest in and enjoyment of art's representational aspects as such be dismissed and regarded as misguided?

Clement Greenberg, an influential art critic of the second half of the twentieth century. could be mentioned as another proponent of a formalist position, especially regarding modern art. According to Greenberg, paintings should foremost be acknowledged as a display of visual configurations. To appreciate a painting aesthetically means to comprehend and appraise it just as a painted surface, not as a representational window that we may look through. Any realistic or illusionistic features, as well as any figurative content, are considered to be aesthetically irrelevant, only the articulation of the medium matters. As he wrote,

> [T]he presence or absence of a recognizable image has no more to do with value in painting has no more to do with value in painting or sculpture than the presence or absence of a libretto has to do with value in music… That a picture gives us things to identify, as well as shapes and colors to behold, does not mean necessarily that it gives us more as *art*… The explicit comment on a historical event offered in Picasso's *Guernica* does not necessarily make it a better or richer work than an utterly "nonobjective" painting by Mondrian (Greenberg, [1961]1989: 133-134).

Greenberg, in a selective description of the history of art, regards its development as a progressive development, away from primarily representation and storytelling, toward a heightened awareness of the medium's inherent potential, to an increased interest in rendering pure shapes and colors (Greenberg, 1965).

Formalism as here outlined played an important role in promoting post-Impressionist art (in Bell's case) and Modernism, not least Abstract Expressionism (in Greenberg's case). As all-embracing descriptive or normative accounts of art, however, they appear to be rather unconvincing. Greenberg's historical view on the visual arts seems to be misleading: also, the "Old Masters", as Greenberg put it, were certainly concerned with the formal aspects of art (cf. Bicknell, 2008: 2). Abstract art is, we may further note, not a twentieth century Western invention, but can be found since antiquity (e.g., as Roman floor mosaics), as well as in the Islamic world, in China, and in Japan, just to mention some examples. Moreover, is it even possible, in practice, to perceive and to appreciate figurative art devoid of its iconic, symbolic, or other kinds of referential strings? And why should we, indeed? To detach pictorial art from its historical and cultural context, from the artist's biographical background and conceivable intentions, its moral impact and significance, etc. would strip it of a wide spectrum of *meaningful* facets which most of us consider to be worthwhile in our encounters with art. The intricate and subtle meaning layers of paintings such as Giorgione's "Tempest" (c. 1508) or "Velasquez" "Las Meninas" (c. 1656) provide cognitively challenging puzzle-solving opportunities, which many beholders find appealing (and which have resulted in countless art historical studies; cf. Bicknell, 2008: 5-6).

IV. Essentialist Theories of Art

A fundamental problem with formalist, as well as mimetic, theories of art is their one-sidedness and essentialist perspective. These approaches are restricted to a limited set of functional characteristics of art, while tending to neglect or dismiss others. But how should we proceed in order to define "art", and which are its essential properties? Numerous attempts have been made to find an intensional definition of art by specifying its necessary and jointly sufficient conditions. Mimetic theories have been prevalent and long-standing candidates in that respect. Still, such theories are more complex and diversified than often acknowledged. Pictorial mimesis as such is not necessarily considered to be a straightforward copy theory, where the visual "imitation" of particular real-world objects is intended, but rather the depiction of kinds or types of things (cf. Ranta, 2000). An alternative attempt to define art has been to stress its emotional properties or its expressiveness. But even expression theories might in a broader sense be regarded as mimetic as they focus upon the capacity of art to reflect emotional states in general or particularly of the artist. Referring to such expressive qualities, as already discussed, formalist theories of art have been put forward. From these art theories, then, criteria for making aesthetic (i.e., functional) judgments have been derived, relating art's value to its extent of realism, emotional intensity, or the like.

None of these attempts have, however, been able to account for the diversity of all objects falling under the category "art". Numerous counterexamples could be mentioned where accepted works of art seem to have no emotional or mimetic properties at all (e.g., some abstract art), or where non-artistic objects or activities exhibit such properties. Consequently, these properties are neither necessary nor sufficient.

The history of art is a history of change and creativity which continuously challenges and evades from pre-existing concepts of art. Thus, as several scholars have suggested during the last few decades, art ought to be thought of as an open concept without necessary and sufficient conditions for its application (cf. Khatchadourian, 1969; Tatarkiewicz, 1971; Weitz, 1956; Ziff, 1953). According to Morris Weitz, for example, there is no property common to all objects called art, and, moreover, any attempt to specify such a property would preclude future artistic innovation. As he puts it: "the very expansive, adventurous character of art, its ever-present changes and novel creations, makes it logically impossible to ensure any set of defining properties" (Weitz, 1956: 152). Influenced by Wittgenstein's view on the nature of games, language, and other open concepts, several scholars have argued that the concept of art is analogous to those, where its category members are related to each other by so-called family resemblance, held together by prototypical reference points (cf. Ranta, 2002).

Accordingly, we might better conceive of the category "art" (or "the visual arts") as centering around best or exemplary members such as, for example, Greek and Roman sculpture, Renaissance paintings, Cezanne's still lifes, and so on. From these reference points other category members may more or less diverge, and contemporary art certainly consists of numerous works which are atypical in this respect. Thus, an object's status as art should perhaps be seen as a quantitative instead of a qualitative matter: "How much is it art?" instead of "Is this art?".

To some extent, though, essentialist theories of art are not at all farfetched, even if they are not all-inclusive and cannot provide necessary and sufficient conditions. They hint at some characteristics which

historically seen, even nowadays, often have been associated with the core of the concept of art. Hence, imitation and expression in various senses, hedonic effects due to certain perceptual properties, and so on are significant and contributing aspects, disjunctively and conjunctively, in that regard.

V. The Meaningfulness of Iconic Meaning

Undoubtedly, aesthetic activities have since their historical beginnings included the creation of iconic representations. Image-making started already in the Lower and Middle Paleolithic eras (2,000 – 40 ka) with humans manipulating objects by 'making them special', e.g., by applying abstract, geometric marks patterns onto them, though without any obvious symbolic intentions (e.g., the ochre block Blombos MI-6, c. 77 ka; cf. Dissanayake, 1995; Malotki & Dissanayake, 2018). But subsequently, during the Upper Paleolithic era (40-10 ka), more clear-cut representational image-making emerged with the creation of outline shapes as persuasive two-dimensional depictions of three-dimensional objects, such as engravings and outline paintings. In Europe, such images are represented in figurative cave art in, for example, Lascaux and Chauvet (Guthrie, 2005), which mostly displayed animals, while humans mostly were represented as statuettes, e.g., so-called Venus figurines (Lorblanchet & Bahn, 2017). This image-production may have been a universal, innate source of pleasure among humans, perhaps providing a feeling of having control over nature. Be that as it may, the creation of iconic representations is certainly an age-old human activity, where pictures have rendered particular, general, or ideal objects or states of affairs (cf. Ranta, 2000: 245-256).

Furthermore, the capacity of artworks to function as iconic or mimetic signs has been a prevalent theoretical focus of interest since at least Classical Greece, where the imitative or mimetic function of certain objects (such as painting and sculpture) or activities (such as dance and theatre) was discussed.[3] In Plato's case, mimesis was considered with mistrust, for epistemological and moral reasons, whereas Aristotle had a more supportive attitude (Ranta, 2000: 65-68). According to the latter, mimetic arts afford a special form of enjoyment, and humans - qua rational animals - enjoy seeing imitations of other objects or actions. To recognize something in an imitation is a form of learning, and it is natural for humans to take pleasure in cognitive efforts as these. Aristotle did not have the same suspicion about sensory perception as Plato, which allowed for a more generous attitude toward imitative works of art and their ability to afford knowledge.

Hence, the mimetic arts may give us essential knowledge about human behaviour and the world, about how people, gods and heroes usually - under certain circumstances - act (but also ought to act). Apart from this, the recognition of likenesses as such is a cognitive activity which gives us enjoyment. Aristotle assumes that it is natural for human beings to feel pleasure when encountering mimetic representations (as all cognitive activities are supposed to be pleasurable). In his *Rhetoric* he writes:

> And since learning and admiring are pleasant, all things connected with them must also be pleasant; for instance, a work of imitation, such as painting, sculpture, poetry, and all that is well imitated, even if the object of imitation is not pleasant; for it is not this that causes pleasure

[3] For a discussion concerning the concept of mimesis, see Ranta (2000). For a detailed examination of ancient, especially Greek, views on the conception of mimesis in relation to art and images, see e.g. Sörbom (1966).

> or the reverse, but the inference that the imitation and the object imitated are identical, ...(Aristotle, *Rhetoric* I, xi, 1371 b, quoted in Beardsley, [1966] 1985: 57).

In Aristotle's view the enjoyment of art and the acquisition of knowledge through it are clearly not incompatible. Indeed, as he claims in the *Poetics*,

> ...the habit of imitating is congenital to human beings from childhood..., and so is...the pleasure that all men take in works of imitation. A proof of this is what happens in our experience. There are things which we see with pain so far as they themselves are concerned but whose images, even when executed in very great detail, we view with pleasure. Such is the case for example with renderings of the least favored animals, or of cadavers (Aristotle, 1967: 20, 1148 b).

Although the subject matters of mimetic objects in themselves may not be pleasurable, the, our recognition of them, as well as the awareness that they are not real but are imitations, can bring enjoyment (Beardsley, [1966] 1985: 58 – 59).

Aristotle's and other philosophers' theoretical reflections in this matter are certainly worth a discussion in themselves. However, in the present context it might also be fruitful to consider more recent empirical studies, more specifically research from cognitive and experimental psychology. Within the last few decades, research into visual perception, object recognition, and involved cognitive as well as emotional processes, has made a significant progress (cf. Ranta, 2000). Within so-called experimental aesthetics, numerous studies have been carried out using scaling techniques, thereby focusing on personality aspects as well as ratings made by subjects on scales such as simple-complex, uninteresting-interesting, emotional-unemotional, displeasing-pleasing, familiar-unfamiliar, realistic-abstract, and so on. Moreover, also other determinants have been considered, such as the duration of self-exposure to stimulus patterns, biopsychological indices including changes in neurological activities, in the skeletal musculature, etc.

Generally speaking, we may presuppose those pictorial representations as such draw attention - as "windows" or focus points in a visual environment from which they diverge and function as "attention units", which spontaneously trigger comprehension attempts (Cohn, 2007: 36). Encounters with visual artworks are accompanied by expectations, and occurring deviations necessitate active cognitive processes. Referring to Jean Piaget's notions of accommodation and assimilation, the psychologist George Mandler, for example, has suggested that such adaptations create affective responses, or, more exactly, to arousal changes in the autonomic nervous system (ANS).[4] Events or stimuli which are extremely agreeable with existent

[4] Accommodation is defined as "the case in which a new experience is such that existing structures (schemas) cannot accept the new information; structures must be changed in order to take account of it...In the case of assimilation, on the other hand, existing structures remain unchanged, but the interpretation of the world is changed in order to deal adequately with a slightly changed situation - for example, when meeting somebody at a party and finding the initial conversation about a painting puzzling because the other person talks about shadings when we see brilliant color. We might accommodate these new opinions to a new structure, but simply

expectations (or mental schemata) are easily comprehensible but may have a relatively low affective intensity. Various degrees of deviations, however, may result in positive or negative emotional experiences. In the case of slight incongruity, just demanding assimilative processing, the emotional response becomes intensified and positively evaluated, as well as in some cases of major incongruity, where, though, the stimuli have been successfully accommodated. Unsuccessful attempts to accommodate new information will, however, result in an unfavorable experience (Mandler, 1982, Mandler,1984; cf. also Ranta, 2000: 239-240). It should be pointed out, though, that the ability to assimilate or to accommodate new information is highly variable due to personal characteristics, such as age, education, cultural background, etc.

The assumptions above seem also to have been given further support by more recent research. Several experimental studies have investigated correlations of preference judgements with the 'meaningfulness' or subject-matter of pictorial material. For example, one study (with untrained subjects) indicates that degrees of realism in artworks and their subject-matter are significant determinants of preference judgements (the more realistic a painting is, the more it will be preferred; Kettlewell et al., 1990). Other studies suggest that 'naïve' beholders (without any noteworthy acquaintance with art) have a strong interest in object detectability, thus a bias for realistic images. Trained subjects, on the other hand, are to a larger extent interested in formal or abstract configurations (Cupchik & Gebotys, 1988; Freedman, 1988; Pihko et al., 2011). There are still further investigations of correlations between personality (such as so-called sensation seekers) and preferences for subject-matter or realism in artworks (indicating that sensation seekers tend to prefer more ambiguous and expressive paintings).[5]

In another study, examples of contemporary art were used as stimulus material, suggesting that ambiguous pictures which challenge perceptual and cognitive habits, instead of being easily processed, are highly appreciated (Muth et al., 2015), while another study indicates that artworks with a moderate degree of visual ambiguity were most preferred (Jakesch & Leder, 2009). This means that pictures with comprehensible Gestalts or motifs, at least to some extent, get higher preference ratings than completely abstract, meaningless material. Also, the efforts of identifying representational motifs in otherwise complex or abstract images, such as Cubist paintings or so-called Mooney faces, giving rise to Aha-insights, seem to increase aesthetic appreciation (Muth & Carbon, 2013; Muth et al., 2013). Fluency-theories according to which familiarity and recognizability increase aesthetic gratification, i.e., the more fluently perceivers can process stimuli, the more positively they appreciate them (e.g., Reber et al., 2004), appear to be contradicted by these studies; beholders seem often to appreciate a certain degree of novelty and unfamiliarity. Further, rather the challenging *process* of elaborating ambiguous artworks and getting insights, instead of being in the state of having solved "a problem" within artworks, seems to be a significant aspect of aesthetic appreciation (Muth et al. 2015).

VI. Concluding Remarks

assimilate when we discover that the other person is colorblind - no change in our existing mental organization is needed" (Mandler, 1984: 63).

[5] Zuckerman et al. (1993). Sensation seekers are, psychologically speaking, persons who have a dominant "...need for varied, novel, and complex sensations and experiences and the willingness to take physical and social risks for the sake of such experiences" (Zuckerman et al., 1993: 563).

Taken together, then, these studies indicate that detectability of visual configurations, or their mimetic recognizability, appears to be a significant determinant for aesthetic preferences. Iconic meaning in visual works of art may, so to speak, be "meaningful" and relevant for aesthetic appreciation. Regarding concepts such as "aesthetic" or "art", it may very well be questioned whether any essentialist definitions or functional theories are achievable. Aesthetic determinants such as disinterested pleasure (in Kant's sense) or mimetic realism are neither necessary nor sufficient for something to qualify as a work of art. Still, mimetic representations could perhaps be taken as prototypical and "best" examples of the category "art", whereas non-figurative art may belong to the same category by means of family resemblance. Although we may admit that the functioning of artworks sometimes involves mimetic characteristics, we should as well be aware that other properties play a significant role. Nevertheless, a painting's capacity to evoke pleasure because of its mimetic or iconic functionality appears to be a frequently occurring aesthetic determinant, in a conjunctive and disjunctive sense: an artwork's aesthetic "core" may be its mimetic function *and/or* its expressiveness *and/or* its moral significance *and/or*… Accordingly, iconic aspects of artworks may very often, though not necessarily, constitute (or contribute to constituting) common experiences of gratification due to the recognizability of iconic signs. Iconic meaning in the visual arts is by no means all that matters. But sometimes, to some extent, it does.

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