Interpreting Works of Art as Social Metaphors

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Abstract
The emerging emphasis in art education on examining art content as well as forms serves as the premise here in structuring suggestions for interpreting works of art within a socio-cultural context. Art as a general metaphor for human life in various cultural contexts is discussed as a foundation for suggesting metacritical strategies to guide interpretation.

"Images accrue sensation around themselves the longer they endure."
(F. Bacon, in D. Sylvester, 1987, p. 58)

Metacritics have developed many pedagogical art criticism models in the twentieth century. Art education until recently has accepted predominantly psychological models of learning and analytic aesthetics. Consequently it has generally accepted critical models that are explicit and detailed in recommending specifics for description and analysis but generally are fairly sketchy on how to do interpretation. This may be as a result of a structural emphasis that rises naturally from the paradigms mentioned, as opposed to a focus on art content. Interpretation, as an explanation of a work's meaning, demands from metacriticism some attention to that content. In addition, interpretation is a process of creative synthesis that does not lend itself well to a predetermined structure as do the linear operations of description and analysis. The structure of interpretation must arise from the nature of the artwork being examined. The following approach to interpretive metacriticism makes suggestions for interpretation through attention to forms and their meanings in the context of the work's intrinsic connections to an unavoidable sociocultural context.

The first assertion to be made in this process is that art is communication of some sort. Certainly, although there may be universal aspects to art, it is not in any sense a universal language. That wonderfully romantic notion disappears in the light of analysis. The constructs, symbols, and nature of aesthetic communication are culture bound. The values, mores, languages, institutions, and resulting symbolic expressions of a given culture determine the meaning(s) of artworks and aesthetic performance within the framework mutually agreed upon by that culture. For example, a swastika found in a painting may mean brutality and terror in Western culture, but may be seen as Visnu's blade of time by a Hindu. Interpretation of artworks, then, is culture bound, not universal, and suggestions for practice must be set in this context.

In Western culture, particularly in the professional art subculture, art may not be seen as communication about anything more than itself. A second assertion made here is that view is incorrect. Art is about something beyond itself. Gottlieb said that art must be about something; it cannot be for its own sake (Lipsey, 1988). In reference to his work, Rothko was quoted as telling a critic, "They are not pictures" (Lipsey, 1988, p. 53). He went on to explain that instead they are representatives of the whole of man's [Rothko's] experience. Anderson (1988) describes works of art as storehouses of psychic energy. Beckman stated about his painting: "When spiritual, metaphysical, or immaterial events come into my life, I can only fix them by way of painting." He goes on to say, "... shapes become beings and seem comprehensible to me in the great void and uncertainty of the space I will call God" (Herbert, 1964, p. 132). In the broadest sense,
then, art evokes human emotions and ideas. It is a metaphor for the human life of the heart and mind. This life metaphor cannot escape being culturally embedded. Andre Breton said, "The man who cannot visualize a horse galloping on a tomato is an idiot" (Breton, p. 258). This statement, spoken by a surrealist for its shock value, could very well be turned on him from another cultural point of view. From a Hindu perspective, for example, one might well say, anyone who cannot understand the nature of an image of God with four arms is an idiot. The myths a culture lives by, whether they be science, Christianity, democracy, capitalism, or whatever, are portrayed and exist in that culture's artifacts. Just as we are more than our external selves, these artifacts also reflect some inner reality (Campbell, 1972). As the senses of human beings serve their spirit or core being, so the forms of visual artifacts serve their metaphysical essence. Metaphor is integral to the visual arts. Human beings' biological imprinting tendency is such that what we experience becomes embedded in our psyches, ready to emerge in the further definition of whatever culture we participate in. Culture is a feedback system through which people send messages to themselves about the nature of reality. A major vehicle in this system is the arts.

There are varying degrees of collective and individual reality stressed in different cultures and by different individuals. Jung (1964) suggests that at some level there is one collective consciousness, and that this collective consciousness is partially defined in cultural archetypes. These archetypes, such as the mandala, the spiral, and the circle, hold meaning and validity cross-culturally in a universally understood way. The ancient Greeks, and now again some contemporary scientists, take the concept of collectivity one step further. This metaphor, called Gaea, has it that the Earth and all its organisms are, in fact, one living interdependent being. Baruchello and Martin (1985) have it that we are like bees, all with the same collective imprint, but embed with individual and regional variations that manifest themselves in our dance. Jalal al-Din Rumi, who died in 1272 envisioned it thus:

We have all been parts of Adam, we heard these melodies in Paradise. Although the water and earth of our bodies have caused a doubt to fall upon us something of those melodies come back to our memory.

(Anderson, 1988)

Although they are a record of the collective reality and its cultural and individual variations, the visual arts do not necessarily reflect a direct one-on-one correlation between the reception and internalization of experience and its depiction in visual form. Paul Klee says that, "From the root the sap flows to the artist, flows through him, flows to his eye" (Herbert, 1964, pp. 76–77). He explains that although the artist gathers and passes on what comes to him from the depths, the artwork may not look any more like the experience than the leaves look like the roots of the tree.

Nevertheless, in all primitive cultures, and in most art subcultures today, art has had agreed upon ground rules, structure, and meaning that have been readily accessible and clearly understood by the members of that culture of society (Wentick, 1978). Within their own cultural contexts, whether that be a Yoruba village or the East Village, artists have worked according to elaborate (often subliminally ascribed) rules, in very explicitly defined ways to retain their status as artists or artisans in that group. So called primitive cultures and modern manifestos both go so far as to prescribe proportions, dimensions, poses, stylistic content, and appropriate themes, all of which have had very specific, often even didactic meaning. In Europe, in the Middle Ages, for example, art was literally a visual language, wherein forms and colors had collectively established denotations.
As visual language and as forms making concrete those ultimately unknowable, undefinable great truths of humanity, the visual arts have served politics, religion, psychology, and science. As attempts to understand and control reality, art progressed with human consciousness through varying stages. At present, symbols and myths are overlaid, one on another back through these various stages of collective consciousness (Lippard, 1983). Many of us (especially art professionals) seem to have forgotten at this point that there was a time when art was inseparable from life, woven intrinsically into the daily common reality. But the fact that art was and continues to be in the collective subconscious allows certain forms to serve as taproots having the power of the eons. The base of these roots goes back to the earliest animistic attempts to control our lives and our fate.

Background of Aesthetic Forms as Metaphor

The earliest art we know of was animistic in nature. Animism has it that objects of nature are inhabited by spirits, by gods. The natural object, as spirit container, and the artist were equals in a world together. The paradigm of the artist as objective observer simply did not exist, and so art as imitation was not the point. Rather then being a clumsy, not quite adequate representation of nature as it may now be seen, much primitive art is, in fact, very sophisticated nonimitative form. The work, rather than representing an already existing reality, was formed to represent its own reality and was thought, like all other things in nature, to have a spirit of its own. The totem did not represent the hawk or the whale. It was in fact the spiritual home of the hawk or the whale. It personifies, like some children’s art, an all-at-onceness containing what is known, seen, and felt.

Perhaps the most powerful animistic spirits were contained in stone. Lippard (1983) calls stone the most basic and mythic of materials. The matriarchal societies of prehistory saw the great mother Earth, herself, as stone. Stone served as repository for fertility, for life spirits of various kinds, and for guides to living. Various cairns, mounds, stone circles, and rows from prehistoric times attest to stone as a repository of collective spirit, which eventually became individual spirit (i.e., the column evolving into the Greek status), and eventually spirits of individuals (statues of Hercules and Kali, and the Pietà). In this context the fact that the Florentines carried heavy stone statutory into battle (McCarthy, 1957) to protect them makes perfect sense. It also helps to explain the contemporary use of gravestones when aluminum would be more lasting, or why a concrete government building is given a fake marble overlay. It has to do with modern man’s roots in the past, the psychic underlay of symbolic form and material as representing life power. If there were no power in the forms of the past, why would revolutionaries bother to smash the image of the czar, of Mao, or the pagan idols? Animism, rising from a need to control, still lives in artforms today.

Naturally rising from animism was the construct of dualism. Dualistic thought has it that if spirit inhabits forms, then “good” spirits should be encouraged and “bad” ones placated, frightened away, or subdued. And if humans can act upon nature in this way then it follows that man is above or at least outside nature. Individualism as practiced by the Greeks, which placed man outside of nature, and later Christianity are paradigms of dualism. Christianity in its constructs of heaven and hell, its followers’ increasing metaphysical stance, and resultant distance from the Earth through time, is a good example to examine. Taking one of Jung’s archetypes, the mandala, and seeing it evolve from the Greek Cross to the standard Christian cross of today with its axial center above center, connotes this evolution. The early cross is centered
between the Earth and a metaphysical God. The later cross reflects the Christian’s lesser concern with an earthly life than a metaphysical afterlife. This tendency is also apparent in the man and God-centered Christian renderings of the Middle Ages and early Renaissance, in which man and God are accurately represented while the natural world is usually clumsy and inaccurate.

It was the Christian’s dualistic above-or-out-of-nature vision that gave rebirth to the metaphor of the omniscient observer seen in classical Greece, and ultimately to the mechanical model of the universe and the modern scientific outlook. The man-nature dualism necessary for this outlook begins to be reflected in the art of the Renaissance. Leonardo’s study of human proportions, according to Vitruvius, reflects this analytic sensibility at the same time that it pays a debt to the earlier Greco-Roman dualistic scientism. Also, paradoxically, through increased analysis and the development of the scientific perspective in the forms of tools such as linear perspective increasingly naturalistic rendering evolved. This naturalism, too, in its omniscient stance, reflects man’s need to control the circumstances of his being. It is naturalism, which defines excellence in the degree of a work’s verisimilitude to an external reality, that is the dominant artistic paradigm in the Western world, even now, except within the high art subcultures.

Competing sets of cultural assumptions have manifested themselves in very different forms in non-European cultures. Far Eastern art, for example, which has been every bit as highly evolved as European art at parallel times, has not generally exhibited European dualism. Instead one sees a dominant paradigm of man being one with nature, reflected, for example, in Ukiyo-e images. The floating Ukiyo-e world is meant to convince the viewer that she or he is of, rather than separate from, the world portrayed.

The current perception of the artist as an idiosyncratic creative genius, challenging rather than reinforcing society’s notions of reality, is also a culturally determined construct that has its roots in the Renaissance. This agreed-upon emphasis on individualism is uniquely modern and uniquely Western in outlook. In fact, as late as the 17th century such an individually creative master as Poussin was defending the cultural correctness of his work and denying the insertion of his “attitude” into his forms (Arnheim, 1986).

The roots of modern Western art, then, lie in a self-conscious drive for originality that could no longer be contained by the naturalistic tradition after being stretched to the limits by Impressionism. After that, the artist breaks away from any intent of imitating the natural world for its own sake. It is the idea’s relationship to form that becomes the dominant paradigm. This also is an extension of the scientific vision in the sense that collectively we now accept that there are worlds beyond, beneath, and above us that we can neither control nor fully hope to understand. Instead of a Christian universe where God is in his heaven and all is right with the world, or the solid mechanistic world of the industrial age, we have been thrown forward into the same uncertain space that our early ancestors inhabited: a place that is mysterious and full of unanswered questions, where mass is ultimately energy, and speed and time are one. We live in a world that, even when it is depicted in art forms we all understand, is ultimately representative of inward idiosyncratic psychological realities. We have come full circle to the initial void Beckman calls God, that early man feared and tried to control through naming, collective representation, and ritual.

A fundamental difference between modern and primitive art is precisely that collective understanding or lack of agreement on the form’s denotative content. Any member of a traditional culture in Papua, New Guinea, knew exactly what the meanings of a given mask were, unlike a typical American, who has no
idea that Christo's *Surrounded Islands* are among other things, referents to Monet's *Water Lilies*. Similarly, Arp's and Pollack's forms are concrete manifestos of the psyche in motion is only known to subculture initiates. In the late twentieth century, art is no longer collectively referential in an intellectual, discursive sense, except within initiated subcultures.

A second fundamental difference between ancient and contemporary art is that the ancient work is unself-conscious, while the contemporary work is highly self-conscious. The discursive meanings of paintings, sculptures, even photographs may not be self-evident, however, precisely because of all the possibilities for meaning intrinsic to the intellectualization of art. In order to understand a work directly there are languages to be learned that rest in theoretical constructs established by artists and theoreticians. In a pluralistic culture that spawns a pluralistic art subculture, one cannot hope to have integrated all the necessary premises for complete understanding of all images. That is not to say it should not be attempted, at lease by those in the art subculture, but total success should not be expected.

There is one way art continues to communicate broadly and directly. That is in the realm of feeling. Langer (1980) says that art objectifies subjective experience. The life of an artwork can be seen as being in the power and nature of its subjective content. The artist consciously or subconsciously imbues the work with his or her lived experience in the process of forming. The artist cannot help but integrate something of how she or he feels about life into the forms created. Thus artists consciously or subconsciously give form to the spirit of their times.

**The Nature of Visual Metaphor**

Integral to interpreting art as metaphor is the realization that visual forms allude to or imply meaning beyond their literal associations (Arneim, 1986). Bonheur's *Ploughing in Nivernais*, for example, in denoting men and oxen in the act of ploughing the earth may connotate a hard but honest struggle to live from the land, a pathetically outmoded technology from which science has rescued us, man's union with the noble beast in domination of the earth, or ignorant (noncross-contour) rape of the land. All of these connotations are valid if they bring the viewer's life experience to bear, and refer back to the visual evidence for their justification. It is perfectly acceptable, in fact probable, that the literal meaning intended by the artist will not be the exact meaning attached to the work by the viewer. The various layers of meaning in artworks are what take them beyond mere illustration. The potential for complexity in those layers is what separates great from banal art. If the point is reflection on sensation or feeling, shallow or surface-oriented denotative forms will not hold interest for long. Great art has many layers and a multiplicity of possible meanings.

In interpreting works of art as life metaphors, it is important to be clear as to the nature of metaphor itself. Metaphor is a symbolic transformation that occurs when the use of one thing (visual image, figure of speech, musical configuration, etc.) in its entirety denotes another thing in its entirety (Feinstein, 1982). The circle as psyche, mandala as wholeness or balance, swastika as time or terror, or the sun as life are examples of visual metaphor. "Metaphor derives from the desire for sensory concreteness" (Arneim, 1986, p. 152) in what we know. The symbol is an object of the known world... "expressing the life and sense of the inexpressible" (Jaffe, 1964, p. 264). If, as Lippard (1983) says, thought not be verbal, then visual metaphor functions as a nonverbal, symbolic, conceptual feedback system. This ability and desire to symbolize and to interpret symbols is singularly human (Broudy, 1972).
Further, this objectification of feeling and imagination is an essential — not peripheral — process and product of human thought. It is a fundamental process of the mind that occurs continuously (Langer, 1980). It helps us understand the meaning of experience that, in turn, defines reality. According to Pasternak, metaphor is “the handwriting of the soul” (Anderson, 1988).

Communicating as it does on many levels, visual metaphor compresses and intensifies information. This concentration of meaning paradoxically allows for enlarged understanding. “Through cross-association and clusters of related meaning . . . [it activates] a higher level of integration in the mind, related to humans' continuing need to harmonize our experiences and reconcile the dualities of our [psychospiritual and physical] selves” (Anderson, 1988, p. 14). Metaphor is an all-at-onceness, the concrete equivalent of eidetic imagery, with huge amounts of information crammed into it — much more than linear description has the capacity to carry. As records of felt experience that are inexpressible in a linear, discursive mode, visual artifacts rely on connections and relationships that ultimately combine to make statements that are holistic and global in nature. They physionomically tie vision, imagination, and feeling together in one package (Feinstein, 1982).

Perception of such a holistic cognitive package must rely heavily on intuition (Arnheim, 1986). It must be a total process not only of the field of vision, but of the imagination, attitude, and emotional involvement funded by previous experience. Literal description of forms, while it is foundationaly important, certainly is not sufficient for interpretation. Describing Rothko’s work, for example, as the relationship of colors, while on one level is true, ultimately is beside the point. Seeing those colors as presence of human spirit and their mingling and positioning as a statement of human reality may come closer. Artist Anne Truitt (1984) says that marks on paper are “as meaningless as chicken tracks” until someone makes the vital connection of attaching meaning to them. The point is that the viewer must look below and beyond the surface of the forms and obvious thematic content to reach for the metaphorical thematic content at the heart of the work of art.

**Interpretation: Attitudes and Approaches**

Some primary assumptions about approaching a work of art follow. First, the foundational experience must be one-on-one direct contact between the viewer and the work of art. Like friendships, developing relationships with artwork takes direct contact. Second, it also takes time. Third, artworks cannot be understood fully as metaphors for life experience entirely through an external source. Ultimately, the subjective meaning of a work must be experienced by each individual viewer in the presence of the work itself. The primary task of interpretation is feeling as a result of looking at an artwork, then reflecting, analyzing, and understanding those feelings as they are stimulated by and relate back to the work itself.

Truitt (1984) explains that in her mind the central and unavoidable fact in making art is its high emotion. She feels that artists must thrust themselves wholly into the work and let it take them “like riders who gallop into the night, eagerly leaning on their horse’s neck, peering into a blinding rain” (p. 26).

The process of seeing and interpreting an artwork must take a similar emotionally charged attitude. Viewers must become attuned to images rather than trying to command them. They must trust the interaction between self and the image and be possessed of the quality of it, the mood of it. They must tune the neural receivers to the emotive driving force in the work and trust that the work will carry...
them. They will not know where they are going until they have arrived, but by trusting in that arrival, the process will carry them through the blinding rain.

The quality of attention, then, must be emotively based and empathetic. That is not to imply passivity. Artworks transmit the energy stored in them "according to the quality of attention we bring to them" (Anderson, 1988, p. 8). The person who would understand an artwork must surrender to the impressions presented while at the same time being aware of the effect these impressions are having. The proper attentive behavior, then, requires a balance of empathy and distance: empathy necessary for emotional transference, and distance necessary for the objective analysis intrinsic to intellectual understanding. The foundational premise is one of emotional involvement with the form. This empathy must fund both analysis and intuition. Intuition, in this sense, is the perception of wholeness, of interconnectedness, of oneness between form and meaning that may come as an insight at any point. If art is the objectification of subjectivity, which may be interpreted in a multiplicity of ways, then it is feeling, not reason, that is the foundation. Reason must arise from feeling, not vice versa, in interpreting works of art.

Associative and categorical information is significant as it funds this primal interaction between the viewer and the artwork. The fact that Whistler was painting his mother in Arrangement in Grey and Black #1, or that Monet was almost blind when he painted his late Waterlilies, or that El Greco was a Mannerist may provide structural bearings for the interpretive process; but when a multiplicity of interpretations are possible, and in a deconstructionist or hermeneutic mode, many devices or angles of approach are appropriate. One should take care that such information does not act as a foil, providing diversion when encountering an artwork that does not elicit the viewer's immediate gut response. The viewer may "see" the information about the work rather than having an aesthetic experience in the face of the psychic energy stored within the forms. The point is that artworks are potentially alive. Contextual information should be used to stimulate and heighten that psychic spirit rather than in place of it.

Interpretation of artworks is not a scientific process. None of what is said, felt, or imagined in the face of work is provable in the scientific sense. Rather, it is a search for that sort of truth that is value-related, which traditionally has been associated with love, with the soul, with a sense of the rightness one can feel in the fibers of being. This, like religion or philosophy, allows for many correct interpretations — as many as there are viewers, visions of the collective psyche, or paradigms of lived reality. But, like religion and philosophy, interpretation of artworks cannot be self-referential, or it becomes simple reverie and loses its collective meaning. The beacon, always to be referred to for bearings when interpreting works of art, is the visual form itself. If what the viewer says makes sense in reference to the forms presented, it can be said to be an emotional truth, a valid interpretation.

The process of creatively looking at artworks should be a self-absorbing act done for its own sake. A quality of fun should pervade the process like that which guides pure research, the attitude equivalent of a child absorbed with finding shells on the beach, or finding the underlayer of rabbit fur in the process of stroking. An exploratory impulse guided by the need for emotional satisfaction should guide the act. One cannot command or demand art's energy. It must be interactive. Subservience to the experience paradoxically allows for a heightened awareness of its qualities while the experience is engaged.

**Interpretive Techniques**

An approach to detecting an artwork's life pulse is a deepening process of de-
scription. At the most basic level one begins by describing the obvious visual and denotative qualities. This should be very literal description, such as describing a Rothko work as horizontal rectangles of color arranged in a vertical pattern. In describing the obvious qualities of a work, one is not a camera objectively recording every detail. Rather, she or he is an emotively driven human being looking for what makes the work vital and significant. One cannot help but see selectively, separating what is significant from the merely supporting forms. Basic description is the process of sensory orientation that helps us adjust to what we are seeing in order to make such determinations, and to judge intelligently expressive qualities. The first task is to grasp the forms contained in a work as intelligent and significant configurations (Arnheim, 1969; Feinstein, 1982; Langer, 1980).

The literal recognition and interpretation of a work provides the platform for diving into the next deeper level: that of pattern recognition. The significance of an artwork lies in the patterns that make up its forms. Somewhat comparable to reading, the work only makes sense beyond the literal level of recognizing individual forms when such are put together in patterns. Then we recognize words, sentences, and paragraphs. In the visual arts, forms are also structured in meaningful patterns.

Implicit in the recognition of patterns are their characterization. The principles of design that are the structuring of elements such as color and form, are the devices used by artists in their development of pattern. The perciptent should look for such unity-oriented pattern principles as rhythm, symmetry, repetition, continuation, proximity, and variety-oriented pattern characteristics such as emphasis, focus, asymmetry, contrast, isolation, and proportion. Unity, which is crucial in holding a work together visually and intellectually, must be augmented by variety to keep the work from boring us.

In describing these qualities in a work, it is very often precisely at the point where unity is challenged by variety that significance in the work is found.

The process of describing the significance of patterns in a work may be called formal characterization. Like the pattern of letters and words in this paper, visual patterns only make sense in reference to some concept or feeling beyond themselves. In this light, formal characterization is the application of psychic reality, of life experience to visual forms. We say a work has great tension here, flaccidity there as portrayed in its forms. It moves from left to right, or it is heavy and solid. It is agitated or calm or portrays a contrast between the two. These patterns in artworks are the foundation of style, and it is style that drives content in art, from which meaning is derived.

Asking questions about the emotional and intellectual significance of style is the path to aesthetic experience with artworks. Why does Pearlstein cut off the model’s head, place her on a ladder, paint her in a neutral and cool way as though she were just another part of the interior landscape? How does LaChaise exaggerate his forms in portraying woman; what is emphasized, deemphasized, and why? How does it vary from a naturalistic portrayal? What is he saying about woman? Naturalism, expressive exaggeration, cool formal analysis, fantasy: all of these say something about varying paradigms of reality. Arbitrary color says something different than local color. Exaggerated or distorted forms say something through the character of their distortion, as do nonobjective figures. Understanding the nature of these characteristics is crucial in determining the significance of a work.

It is in the relationship between content and style that the meaning of an artwork lives. A fruitful approach to characterizing this relationship is speculative association. This is a highly intuitive process in which the viewer’s instincts are applied to the image as meaning constructs, like
a glove one tries to fit on a hand. If it is backwards or the fingers are too short or too many in number, one takes it off, tries it another way, or constructs a new glove. If it still does not fit, maybe one is looking at a foot, not a hand, and a shoe needs to be built.

Many tools are useful in attempting to fit a meaning on the forms that are seen. A technique for making such determinations is isomorphic recognition and a corresponding mimetic response. Isomorphism is something (which may not be related except superficially) that is identical or at least similar to something else in form or structure. Memesis, according to Feldman (1987), is the act of the mind when confronted with material it cannot organize to find some correspondence between that material and some concrete/conceptual structure that is already known. It is a "looks-like," "reminds-me-of" approach. Tools that are very useful in developing a memetic approach to art are anthropomorphism, simile, analogy, and allegory.

Anthropomorphism is the projection of human qualities on that which is not human, in this case aesthetic forms. It is very reasonable to approach containers of the human spirit — artforms — in this way, since either consciously or subconsciously artists cannot avoid putting such life qualities into their work. Truitt (1984) says that "every appearance [in a work] has something inside that explains how it looks" (p. 116). In nonobjective works, anthropomorphism is particularly useful in that line, color, and form become the primary communicative medium in the absence of thematic content. Clues to meaning therefore lie wholly in the nature of forms. An anthropomorphic approach might call a wide, upright, dark line, bold or strong, or the color red, angry or aggressive or dangerous. Anthropomorphism relies on body sensitivity and comparison in a biological sense in conjunction with commonly held collective associations.

Simile is a linguistic technique that makes comparisons between forms that are basically unlike each other through the application of a conceptual construct that applies to both. In the case of visual arts this requires the recognition and designation of like qualities in each form for the construction of the conceptual bridge. It is a simile, for example, that would allow an observer to see Stella's recent work as being like a carnival in its gaudy colors and clashing forms. Simile allows for the inventive application of unrelated constructs to what is seen, which serves as bridge to unseen emotive and conceptual essences in a work.

Another technique, analogy, is the development of whole parallel structures of expression. It allows for the application of similar meaning to two constructs or concrete manifestations, which may be very different, based on perceived similarities in characteristics. In addition, one mode may provide insight or access to better understanding of the other. An example of an analogy would be to describe Warhol's Campbell's Soup Cans as being like life in capitalist America: anonymous, regimented, and worth only pennies per unit.

Allegory is more obviously recognized in artworks than analogy by those who are initiates of the culture and time from which the allegory draws its imagery and context. Allegory, which presents concrete images denoting specific human knowledge and experience, thus requires considerably more and broader cultural knowledge of the viewer for its "correct" interpretation. For example, one of the most famous allegorical paintings, Liberty Leading the People, must be understood in the context of the French revolution to avoid being seen as completely absurd. The allegorical construct may be used by an observer as an aid to develop meaning in any work of art. The question to ask is does the application of a "story" to these forms help to make sense of the image? The application of a literal meaning derived from the symbolic content may or may not be appropriate, but
as a technique it may open doors to meaning that would otherwise remain closed.

Conclusions

The techniques described here for approaching the interpretation of an artwork are only useful to the extent that the viewer keeps in mind the premises of the examination. First, art is an expression of human life force, and as such may be thought of and approached as a spirit container or as a metaphor for life. Second, artforms are crafted by individuals or groups in some cultural context. Whatever the artist’s view of his or her society, she or he cannot be beyond it. Therefore, in some way, artforms will also be cultural containers, reflecting the life force of their place and times. Art represents the connection, through aesthetic feeling, between one human being and another, through material form, across space and through time. There is no such thing as a visual art form that says nothing but form, in spite of some artists’ protestations. Just as we are more than our external selves, so artworks made in man’s psychic image express human qualities maybe unseen on the surface, but integral to the forms, and representing the spirit of human life. Ultimately it must not be the eye that sees meaning in these forms, but the soul.

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