

Interpretation and its Role in the Arts

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Interpretation is a central concept in contemporary philosophy of art. The role of interpretation as constitutive of art experience has become almost analogous to that of the Holy Scriptures. According to Arthur Danto, the very existence of an artwork as such depends on interpretation: "An object is an artwork *at all* only in relation to an interpretation" (Danto, 1983, 43). Approving or denying the claim that art is fundamentally dependent on interpretation is directly linked to the question of how the concept of interpretation is construed. However, most of the current literature on this issue takes the association between art and interpretation for granted and is devoted mainly to issues of validity, that is, the problem of incompatible interpretations, as well as to the search for the golden path between monism and pluralism.

Unquestionably, the debate over incompatible interpretations and related issues concerning the logic of interpretation are significant and reflect central aspects of the practice. On the one hand, it seems difficult to deny that an artwork, or any kind of text, may garner more than one interpretation, since such a denial would clearly be in contrast with the common practice. Indeed, even E. D. Hirsch, who defends the bivalence of interpretation, does not deny that a work may garner more than one interpretation: "Not just one but many disparate complex of meaning can be construed. Only by ignoring this fact can a theorist attempt to erect a normative principle" (1967, 25). On the other hand, there is the understandable desire to decide between incompatible interpretations and limit the range of acceptable interpretations. Without constraints, one has no ground for preferring one interpretation to another and the entire practice becomes disordered and therefore pointless. The issue is of importance, especially in the artistic field where constraints are difficult to define and the function of interpretation is in any event complicated and elusive.¹ However, in a rush to resolve the tension between monism and pluralism the fundamental questions: What does one do when one is interpreting, and for what purpose? are often disregarded or only briefly sketched.

In this paper I will suggest an answer to these questions and examine the dependence of art on interpretation in light of my proposed answer. My analysis consists of the following: (1) some brief comments on the standard and too inclusive formulations of interpretation as presented in much of the contemporary literature; (2) an analysis of interpretation as a problem-solving activity, distinguishing it from the close, yet distinct, notion of decoding; and (3) a redefinition of the role of interpretation in the artistic domain in light of this analysis.

I. The Inclusive Notion of Interpretation

It is commonly agreed that interpretation is a cognitive activity associated with understanding and meaning in the most general sense. Surprisingly, very little is said beyond this, as if the idea of what kind of understanding and meaning are involved in the interpretative act has no bearing either on the issue of incompatible interpretations or on the link between art and interpretation. Let us look at a few examples. David Novitz writes: "For the most part, we interpret in order to understand, and to have arrived, in this way, at a sound understanding is to have interpreted successfully.... [I]nterpretation is intimately linked to understanding" (1999, 4). Similarly, according to Robert Stecker, one interprets in order to "make sense of something that didn't before make sense," and to "seek understanding" (1992, 291). This formulation creates the impression that a lack of understanding is a prerequisite for interpretation and that interpretation is required whenever an object does not make sense. Thus, Novitz states that "interpretation is called for only when we know that we have run out of established knowledge and belief in terms of which to dispel our confusion or ignorance" (1999, 5). But how does one form one's own understanding out of confusion and ignorance? Is it a case where one interprets what one does not understand? How would the interpreter know where to begin and how to proceed if lack of understanding and knowledge is the point of departure? This issue also touches upon the hermeneutic circle, according to which "we interpret a text in order to understand it, but we must understand a text in order to interpret it" (Stern, 1980, 128n13). The hermeneutic circle implies that interpretation aims at an understanding that arises continuously from a previous one, and not a discrete shift from a lack of understanding to enlightenment.

Of course, the claim that interpretation is linked to understanding is correct, but so are other cognitive activities. Explaining, clarifying, describing, and decoding are activities that seek understanding, albeit not of the same kind. These distinctive terms that ordinary language offers indicate that these are activities which differ from one another in some meaningful sense, although they are all associated with understanding. Explanation, for instance, is given in order to "make sense of something that didn't before make sense," as Stecker puts it in respect to interpretation. Does this mean that interpreting and explaining are mere synonyms? Not according to ordinary language. The question of whether an explanation proposed in the context of a scientific theory is interpretative is a question that makes sense only when one acknowledges the conceptual differences between explanation and interpretation.²

The general impression one gets from the relevant literature is that these distinctive cognitive terms are superfluous, or better still, they can be reduced to one inclusive term. Peter Lamarque, for example, holds that "the need to interpret arises when meaning is unclear" (1999, 96). Charles Taylor similarly notes that "[i]nterpretation, in the sense relevant to hermeneutics, is an attempt to make clear, to make sense of, an object of study" (1985, 15). Surely, some cases of unclear meanings call for clarification. In this same vein, Annette Barnes states that one does not interpret what one finds obvious (1988). No doubt, this is an analytical truth, but the reverse is not necessarily the case. Not every non-obvious object calls for interpretation on account of its being non-obvious. The theory of relativity, for example, is not at all obvious to the uninitiated, but it calls for explanation and clarification rather than interpretation. In clarifying, one either replaces the unclear expression with another one or supplies examples, without attempting to add information to the original case or modify it in some sense. This is how Wittgenstein construed the function of philosophy: "Philosophy aims at the logical clarification of thoughts. Philosophy is not 'a body of doctrines' but an activity.... [It] consists essentially of elucidations. Philosophy does not result in 'philosophical propositions,' but rather in the clarification of propositions" (1961, 4.112). Thus, Wittgenstein does not ascribe interpretation to philosophy, since interpretation (at least, verbal interpretation) consists of arguments about its object (propositions). Clarification evokes understanding by means of communication (words, expressions, symbols, and the like). Interpretation, however, goes beyond such means and offers an argument about the nature of the object in question. To be sure, interpretation may depend on certain clarifications, just as it may involve descriptions and explanations, but this interdependence of different cognitive activities does not render them identical. On the contrary, it is only because these are different activities that one can speak of their interdependence. Identifying the interpretative act with clarification, or more generally with any activity which seeks understanding, in effect disregards the differences acknowledged by ordinary language.

Interpretation is also often associated with assigning meaning. According to Stephen Davies, interpretation "attributes a meaning, more generally a property" to an object (1995, 8). Likewise, Eddy Zemach claims that "to interpret X is to say what X means, that is, to assign X a meaning" (1997, 115). Attributing or assigning meaning can be connected to other activities that we would not normally categorize as interpretation. For example, there are conventional meanings attributed to objects such as road signs by mere decisions (arbitrary in principle). Of course, the decision itself needs to be understood and accepted in order to assign the meaning it suggests, but this kind of meaning is by no means interpretative. Being stipulative, con-

ventional meaning does not correspond to the characteristics we find in typical cases of interpretation. Habits, repetitions, or dramatic events often evoke attributions of meaning. The distinct, thumping chords that open Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*, for instance, have acquired a certain meaning after being used as the victory signal in WWII. This kind of meaning can hardly be accepted as an interpretation of Beethoven's work. It is quite certain that those who are aware of this historical meaning do not think of it as an interpretation of the symphony, and do not evaluate it as such.

One may want to use "interpretation" as an umbrella term that encompasses different cognitive activities, all of which have to do with understanding and meaning. However, even in this approach, in order to avoid confusion, one would have to subdivide this umbrella term into different kinds of interpretation and consider the implications of their differences. This is, for example, Stecker's strategy: "There are several modes of interpretation corresponding to different aims with which we interpret.... Some aims are such that interpretation with these are true or false. Other aims are such that interpretation with these are neither true nor false.... [T]here is no reason to think that just one aim is legitimate" (1987, 303). Indeed, legitimacy of aims is not the issue here, and one may approach the same object from different angles, having different aims in mind. More importantly, holding the view that some interpretations obtain bivalent value while others do not seems useful for solving the tension between monism and pluralism where differences in aims define differences in logical category. But then the question arises as to whether it is useful to subsume different aims that correspond to different logical demands under the same category, and whether these differences do not justify a more distinctive terminology.

It is my impression that the viewing of interpretation in this all-inclusive fashion is influenced by theorists such as Hans-Georg Gadamer, who states that all understandings are interpretations—"*Alles Verstehen ist Auslegen!*" (1960, 366)—and Jacques Derrida, who maintains that there are only "interpretations of interpretations" (1972, 264–5). Analytic philosophers have also emphasized the issue of interpretation by regarding the very basic level of data processing as interpretative. According to Joseph Margolis, "what we describe as perceptual data are already ... *interpretively* formed" (1999, 212). Margolis refers to this sense of interpretation as "constituting." This standpoint renders interpretation, or at least one kind of interpretation, unintentional and uncontrollable, since we are not aware of this basic activity and it is also not a matter of choice. As such, it cannot be proven right or wrong in any sense, and it cannot be compared to alternative processes in order to evaluate it as being better or worse in any sense. Even "plausibility," which according to Margolis is the category relevant to

interpretation (1980, 1995), does not apply to this kind of "constituting interpretation." This basic data processing cannot be described as either bivalent or multivalent, or in any appreciative terms, and the whole issue of incompatible interpretations becomes irrelevant in that context. Moreover, it is not about anything: perception functions at the very basic level of understanding and it cannot assume a preliminary understanding of the pre-processed data; therefore it is not subject to the hermeneutic circle. "Unintentional interpretation" (if we were to accept such a notion) is essentially different from the concept one has in mind when one is seeking constraints or methods of validation, or even considering interpretation in terms of plausibility, as Margolis himself does.

The resulting inclusive notion of interpretation cannot be proven wrong, but ineffective. Arguments about the appropriate logical categorization of interpretation cannot be clearly focused when the disputants have different aims in mind while using the same term. Hume noted that "in all matters of opinion and science ... [a]n explanation of the terms commonly ends the controversy; and disputants are surprised to find, that they had been quarrelling, while at the bottom they agreed in their judgment" (1985, 227). I am not as optimistic as Hume about the capability of clear terminology to settle all controversies, but such a clarification can at least distinguish between arguments that rest on confused terms and substantial arguments that go beyond mere terminology.

II. Interpretation as a Problem-Solving Activity

The dominant framework for debating art interpretation has been determined by the search for the true meaning(s) of artworks. Anthony Savile, for example, states that an interpretation of a work must allow "the work to be correctly perceived and understood" (1982, 7). The assumption that interpretation is an attempt to disclose the true meaning(s) of the work presents two possibilities: that either the true meaning is available or it is unavailable. In the former case, the meaning is either assigned by the artist (intentionally or unintentionally) or it is expressed by the data of the object itself and disclosed by relying on relevant cultural norms. In the latter case, the meaning is either recreated by the viewer, based upon some given data, or created with no constraints.

Interpretation within the *true-meaning-seeking* framework is either true or false. Appreciative values are irrelevant within this framework. No matter how interesting and stimulating an interpretation is, its truthfulness is the only relevant criterion. The true-meaning-seeking framework either allows for only one true interpretation, or if one believes that the true meaning is lost and cannot be retrieved, one is led, paradoxically enough, to a

despaired removal of all restrictions. Neither option is faithful to the common practice, where different interpretations of the same work are acceptable, and yet some are still evaluated as better than others, while others may be entirely rejected. Indeed, many accept this fact and attempt to validate it within the same framework that has created this inconsistency with the standard practice.

Stecker, as quoted above, argues that there are different interpretative aims that justify different approaches, and therefore reveal different meanings. If this is correct then the true-meaning-seeking framework is inadequate for understanding interpretation. Aims in general are not subject to truth conditions of any kind. An aim is neither true nor false, nor is its attainment, even if some truth claims may be involved in defining an aim or attaining it. If interpretation were about true meaning, then there would be no different, justifiable interpretative aims, but only one aim: to uncover the true meaning of the object. Incompatibility, in this case, would be clearly renounced, whereas accepting the legitimacy of different aims tolerates, by definition, incompatible interpretations. Aims and their justifications are independent of the true meaning of the object (if there is such a true meaning), and therefore their understanding requires a different framework.

Instead of viewing interpretation as a true-meaning-seeking activity, I suggest regarding it as a *problem-solving* activity. This framework avoids some of the problems inherent in the true-meaning-seeking framework, and offers an understanding of the particular need for interpretation as distinct from other cognitive activities. Rendering interpretation a problem-solving activity prepares the ground for defining interpretative constraints without depending on truth conditions.

Before turning to the nature of the interpretative problem, let us examine the principal presuppositions of problem-solving activity in general: (1) *Intentionality*: the agent recognizes the problem and intends to solve it. It may happen that an agent accidentally solves a problem without realizing it; we would not regard the nature of such activity as problem-solving activity. Furthermore, it is possible that an agent becomes aware of a problem and finds a solution to it via another person's activity. The solution, in such a case, would be related to the person who recognizes the problem and appreciates its solution. Being unaware of the problem, one cannot offer a solution or appreciate a given solution. (2) *Evaluation*: the agent appreciates the significance of the problem, and attempts to offer the best solution to it. Attending to an object and attempting to solve its problem does not make sense unless one has reasons to believe that the effort is worthwhile. By the same token, one would normally aim for the best solution one could offer in a given context, although one may reevaluate both the problem and its solution when the context changes. It is quite clear that this is commonly

the case with interpretation: texts that are often interpreted are texts of significance. One would not customarily perform a worthless piece of music or analyze a premature novel. Solutions to problems are appreciated in evaluative terms, such as effective or ineffective, better or worse, informative or banal. Solutions, therefore, are neither true nor false, although they make use of facts and involve assertions. Indeed, a good solution can be imaginary, even unfaithful to certain facts, and still successfully function as a solution. (3) *Rationality*: the agent can argue for the proposed solution, and has reasons for preferring it to other solutions. A good solution must be justified by demonstrating its effectiveness. The interpreter must convince the audience that the proposed solution resolves the problem. Justifications may involve theories and facts that are held to be relevant as well as arguments against other solutions. (4) *Originality*: a solution can be repeated, imitated, and applied in different contexts, but these repetitive acts are different from actually solving the problem. A repetition of a known solution is not, in itself, a problem-solving activity; rather, it is an expression of approval of the original problem-solving activity, which produced the initiated solution. A problem-solving activity is always creative in some sense; it creates something that was not known or did not exist before. (5) *Correspondence*: there must be a correspondence between the nature of the problems, the methods of solution, and the logical category of the proposed solution. These three elements are interdependent. The nature of the problem determines the method, and the method in turn determines the logical category of the solution. Problem-solving activities may differ in each of these three elements, but a correspondence between these elements is required in every problem-solving activity.

What is the Interpretative Problem?

Let us consider an example. One may wish to perform Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony* in accordance with the original performance, or stage *Hamlet* the way it was staged by Shakespeare. In order to achieve these goals one would have to explore the historical records concerning the original performances, and attempt to replicate them. There are methods for doing this, although one cannot guarantee their success. Whether one succeeds in tracing the relevant historical records, and whether the effort is worthwhile, is not the issue here. Obviously, if one chooses to make the effort and explore the original performance, one must believe in the significance of the project. The main point is that in light of this aim only that particular performance would be the right one and all others would be simply false. We can see, then, how the goal determines the method and the logical feature of the desired result. Alternatively, one may want to

perform the symphony or the play in a way that would accentuate those qualities that one considers meaningful and central to the work in its new context, regardless of its original performance, and indeed regardless of any other known performances. The new performance unifies the components of the work in a different way, without necessarily dismissing all previous performances as false. Yet the performer must believe that the new performance is informative and worthy in some significant sense. In this case, it is not at all clear what the methods are, and if indeed there are any methods at all for offering such novel performances. The performer has to be creative in order to disclose neglected aspects of the work, and make it relevant and valuable in its new context. It is also important to note that the performance is obviously neither true nor false. If the question were, Is this the original performance? the answer would be given in bivalent terms; however, the answer to the question, How informative is this new performance? must be given in appreciative terms, such as, most instructive, vacuous, and the like.

The two cases are significantly different, although they both deal with the same body of work, and may, in some exceptional cases, overlap, that is, the new performance may unintentionally resemble the original. They may also overlap when the interpreter believes that the original performance is the best, not only in terms of its historical significance, but also in light of other considerations that take into account new developments. In repeating a known performance, one needs to defend the choice, and offer a new perspective on it. An "old solution" is thus "renewed," a novel attempt at justifying its merits.

Both cases—being faithful to the original performance, and the new performance—are commonly regarded in the literature as forms of interpretation. Stecker, as we have seen, suggests that some interpretations are bivalent while others are not. Stecker would probably conclude that these two cases draw a parallel between different interpretative aims. In view of the above characteristics of problem-solving activity, I maintain that there must be some correlation between the nature of the problem, the methods of solving the problem, and the logical category of the solution. If a problem only allows for one correct solution, for instance, in the case of an intercepted enemy's message, it is then significantly different from a problem that allows for multiple solutions. This difference merits the classification of the cases under several categories. The recreation of the original performance is a search for facts, and therefore deserves to be classified as *decoding*. Clearly, the decoder should not invent the facts she is searching; ideally speaking, she is not expected to contribute anything to the facts other than the search itself. It is the second case: the modern performance, which ought to be classified as *interpretation* because it

accords with the common understanding that the interpreter contributes to the meaning of the object, and this contribution teaches us something new about the object in question.

Decoding and interpreting are both intentional activities initiated by a problem discerned in the given object. Both activities attempt to solve the problem by searching beyond the given object. The problem in both cases is somewhat similar: the object is believed to be complete and unified, but appears incomplete, or disordered in some sense. The given object is not meaningless in either case. On the contrary, the components (at least, most of them) are informative on their own, but they do not appear to integrate successfully into a unified whole. The role of certain elements as components of the unified whole is undetermined. Only an object that conveys some meaning qualifies as an object for both decoding and interpreting. The initial understanding of the object poses the problem and triggers a search beyond the given.³ For instance, the understanding that a certain stone engraving belongs to a certain era, and it is genuine and informative, motivates the archeologist to decipher it. The archeologist may be wrong about this premise, but this is beside the point. If she would think of the script in different terms, say, as a forgery or accidental marks engraved by natural forces, she might not attempt to decipher it. An object that is divorced of any meaning does not motivate the agent in any direction. If one were to have no idea about the nature of the object, one would not know where to begin or what to look for. In sum, decoding and interpreting provide answers to questions raised with regard to their objects. The justification for asking questions and attempts at answering them must stem from some preliminary understanding of the given object. A meaningless object poses no questions, and gives no reasons to believe that it is worth searching for its meaning.⁴

The difference between decoding and interpreting, I suggest, mainly lies in the nature of the action taken to unify the object. Decoding seeks to disclose certain facts that exist beyond those given, and assumes that these facts are not only capable of unifying the object, but are indeed constitutive of it. As a result, the meaning assigned to the object is believed to be the only relevant or true meaning. The decoder defines *a priori* the kind of facts she is looking for in order to unify the object, and this definition reflects the decoder's preliminary understanding of the nature of the object. This further indicates that the nature of the solution is generally determined before the search has actually started. The act of decoding, therefore, is an act of revealing the particular facts that constitute the desired solution. The apparently random signals of an enemy's intercepted message, for example, are believed to be determined by a concealed code. Breaking the code, that is, establishing a principle of transformation, and applying this principle to

the signals, is expected to reveal the message's meaning. Of course, one can imagine more than one way of decoding the message, but only one solution will do, that is, the enemy's genuine code. Consequently, the message revealed may be disappointing, while a different code may produce more useful information. Yet the decoder is interested only in the authentic, true message, and will not attempt to decode it differently if she has no reason to suspect the authenticity of the broken code. The coded message is only considered in bivalent terms, and therefore, in this context, all appreciative values are irrelevant.

Similarly, a detective working on a murder case regards a selection of facts as clues that contain vital information. The detective may have different hypothetical "stories" in mind, where each determines the meaning of the clues at the murder scene differently, but only one "story" is assumed to be true, and it is not always the most original or the most inspiring one. The truth-seeking detective would be only interested in the true facts of the story and would eliminate all other possibilities. Another example for consideration is dreams. According to Freud, dreams are coded messages. Although one may assign different meanings to each of the dreamt details, and unify the whole in various ways, only one code will suffice in order to reveal the unconscious message—the code suggested by Freud. In *Genesis*, Joseph, by contrast, regarded dreams as divine messages about future events in Egypt, and decoded Pharaoh's dreams accordingly. The unfolding events proved him right.

Interpretation begins like decoding: it aims at unifying an apparently incomplete or disorderly object that is believed to be inherently complete. The apparent incompleteness may take on different forms, such as a score that demands performance in order to be completed, a text that appears inconsistent in some sense, details that seem redundant or missing altogether, conflicts with categories or values that are held relevant to the context in which the object is examined, and so forth. In each case there is some "disturbance" that prevents the apprehension of the object as the complete, meaningful whole it is believed to be. This approach is typical of traditional biblical interpretations. The Holy Scriptures do not appear fully unified, but are believed to be so, since they represent the word of God. The preinterpreted text appears to contain inconsistencies, redundancies, gaps in information, unrelated stories, or even puzzling messages. The interpreter who believes in the genuine completeness of the Holy Scripture, and their relevance to all times, attempts to show that the "flaws" are only apparent and serve as keys for disclosing significant hidden meanings. The interpreter's aim is to present the Bible as a complete and fully informative text: nothing is really missing, inconsistent, redundant, or irrelevant. The hidden meanings, as suggested by the interpreter, exhibit the completeness and

relevance of the Holy Scripture. The interpreter of the Bible cannot rely on external facts, like the decoder, but must be creative and offer a convincing solution which corresponds to the values and beliefs of the interpreter—a solution that is capable of removing the apparent "flaw."

The interpreter attempts to re-order the object by "excavating" into its deeper layers, as a result bringing a hidden, unifying meaning to light. The nature of the required solution is not predetermined as in the case of decoding. There are no *a priori* principles or defined methods that direct the interpreter in the search for the best unifying meaning. The project reflects the interpreter's creativity, perspective, and values. The interpreter has to recognize and acknowledge the problem, distinguish between the obviously apparent details and the hidden unifying meaning, and show how the apparent anomalies actually comply with the suggested unifying meaning, thereby resolving the apparent "flaw." Interpretation is about internal coherence, and therefore I maintain that the only constraint that should be imposed on interpretation is the requirement of internal coherence. It is this feature that allows for many different interpretations of the same object, since internal coherence can be achieved in more than one way. This does not mean that all interpretations are equally justified, or that "anything goes." Interpretations that fail to convince an audience, due to a lack of internal coherence, are rejected. The question, however, regarding what relevant elements are to be unified is often a matter of dispute, since the preinterpretative understanding of the object and its problem depend on knowledge and values. This is the feature of the hermeneutic circle that often results in disagreement concerning the effectiveness of a proposed interpretation.

Viewing interpretation in these terms entails that the need for interpretation only arises with a certain belief (that the object is inherently unified) and with regard to a certain kind of problem (the apparent disunity). If the agent believes that the object is inherently inconsistent or incomplete in some sense, then the object would not be regarded as worthy of interpretation. An inherently confused text does not call for interpretation but for correction or dismissal. Correcting an incomplete object—a confused text or a premature work of art—is also a problem-solving activity; it is, however, a different kind of activity than interpreting, as it requires different skills and methods. It is one thing to argue that an object is inherently unified, and that this unity is revealed by discovering some of the object's non-apparent qualities, and another to argue that the object is wanting and can only be completed by either adding or eliminating some elements, or by changing its internal order altogether. A new performance of *Hamlet* does not attempt to "correct" or modify the original play or, for that matter, declare the original performance false. Instead, it attempts to highlight the

qualities that form a new understanding of the play in order to make it relevant to a contemporary audience. It strives to teach the audience—which is probably familiar with the play and its previous performances—something new about the (old) play, and also, indirectly, about the audience which is expected to understand the relevance of the newly performed play.

Interpretation is always creative. Unlike the decoder, the interpreter does not start with a defined methodology. The interpreter does not have an *a priori* conception of how to direct the search. Interpretation is unique. Each interpreter may define the problem differently, give different reasons for the significance of the interpretative problem and the effectiveness of the proposed solution. It is within this context that the interpreter's beliefs and values come to the forefront. They bear upon interpretation precisely because interpretation is not determined by independent facts, as is the case with decoding. The interpreter's worldview plays a significant role on both levels: the problem and the solution. Interpreters may disagree on both of these levels; they may disagree about the nature of the problem, or, if they agree on this level, they may dispute the best solution. Each level reveals differences—or, for that matter, agreement—in knowledge, values, and beliefs. The medieval allegorical interpretation of *Song of Songs* presents a good example, as it attempts to solve a problem that a secular reader would not consider to be a problem in the first place. The fact that the Bible includes such an erotic text creates a problem for the orthodox reader who believes in the Bible as a divine, Holy Scripture written by one hand, and expressing one spirit. The medieval interpretation solves the apparent contrast between holiness and earthly, erotic love by viewing the *Song of Songs* as an allegory about the love between God and the nation of Israel. Unity, from the perspective of a believer, is therefore regained. A secular reader, who believes that the Bible is a collection of texts written by different people during different periods, does not recognize the need to unify the Bible. The secular reader may raise different problems in regard to the *Song of Songs* and will, as a result, accept different interpretations of it.

The interpreter's knowledge, values, and beliefs influence the whole process of interpretation: the attempt to unify an object, the definition of the problem, or the "flaw" that initiates the interpretative act, and the suggested solution are all expressions of the interpreter's worldview. This may explain the need to reinterpret an object that has been previously interpreted. It is not that the previous interpretation is proven false, but that it does not correspond to what the new interpreter considers vital and right.

III. Interpreting the Arts

The true-meaning-seeking framework postulates that all objects, or at least all intentional objects, qualify for interpretation, since they are all meaningful in some sense. This understanding conforms to the widely accepted view that all works of art require interpretation since they are all meaningful objects. By contrast, the problem-solving framework presupposes that only objects in which certain problems may be discerned require interpretation, and as a result, interpretation is not mandatory for a meaningful comprehension of works of art. Interpretation and decoding, as well as other cognitive activities, are relevant to art in many ways, but neither of them is necessarily a prerequisite for a meaningful comprehension and appreciation of works of art.

In the true-meaning-seeking framework one regards works of art as messages that carry predetermined meanings. These meanings cannot be directly grasped without the mediation of the interpretative act. Even if these meanings are directly perceived, one cannot be sure that these are the genuine meanings before performing a thorough interpretative act. In the problem-solving framework the situation is different, since not every object raises problems concerning its unity. Therefore, one has to justify not only the offered interpretation, but also the very need for interpretation. If we were to assume that within this framework every work of art as such requires interpretation, it would mean that appearing incomplete and non-unified is essential to works of art. This, I believe, is obviously untrue about art in general, although some works of art may easily create such an impression, and modern art is most likely to take the blame for this development.

Danto holds that "interpretation is inseparable from work" (1983, 44). His claim is based mainly on cases in which two indistinguishable objects may differ significantly in their meanings, despite their apparent likeness: one object is a soup can while the other, although it looks very much like the first object, is a work of art loaded with cultural meanings. According to Danto, the difference between the two cases is that a can of soup is not an object for interpretation, whereas Warhol's ready-made work is, by definition, an object for interpretation—first by the artist, and then by the critic who attempts to come close to the artist's interpretation. In accordance with the problem-solving framework, I maintain that works of art are not created as objects for interpretation, and in many cases the works are directly perceived and appreciated without the mediation of interpretation.

It is true that a can of soup on the kitchen shelf is regarded differently than the similar object exhibited in the museum, and as a result the two cans differ in their meanings. The difference is determined by the context

and the category under which the object is considered in each circumstance. The category related to the object always contributes to its meaning, and a change in category (from non-art to art) affects the meaning of the object. This, however, is generally true about any object found under any category, and is not exclusive to art. Danto concludes that the meaning that is assigned to a work indicates that art owes its existence as such to interpretation. This conclusion, I believe, is not at all necessary, because (1) an object has to be categorized as art before being interpreted as such, (2) not every assignment of meaning is interpretative (as I have argued), and (3) the meaningful bond between an object, its context, and its category is not unique to art.

People outside of professional circles often enjoy and appreciate music, paintings, poems, films, novels, ballet, and other forms of art in a direct fashion, without interpretative mediation. Viewers may read professional criticism and participate in professional discussions about a certain work or a certain artist. However, the common experience of art is not conditioned by these activities. A dismissal of such experiences as erroneous or irrelevant would imply that only art experts and their audience are capable of truly comprehending art. Indeed, there is a significant difference between "innocently" enjoying a work of art and appreciating it on the basis of an acquaintance with the history of art and other related issues. Yet it must be admitted that art is effective in many ways. The fact that some forms of postmodern art are not accessible to the public does not prove that this has been or should be the fate of all forms of art.

Having said this, I do agree with Danto that there are cases where interpretation conditions a meaningful art experience. Since art tends to break norms and create its own rules, there are gaps of knowledge that non-professional viewers may need to fill in, so that they would understand the work. This does not mean that interpretation is always required. There is a difference between cases that require some clarification and background knowledge, cases that are associated with decoding, and cases that require interpretation. Needless to say, it is not the nature of the work that determines the requirement of each of these activities, but rather the viewer's knowledge, beliefs, and types of interest she has in the work in question.

Works of art are composed of different elements, some of which may be unclear or unknown to the viewer. For instance, a contemporary reader may have difficulties with certain expressions or words in ancient poetry. It is not the unity of the poem that is in question in such a case, although one is unable to observe the unity of the work before all its elements are sufficiently clear. Glossaries appended to works are designed precisely for such clarifications. In some cases there is a need for background information in order to understand the role of the elements and their interactions within

the work. For example, when the viewer is unaware of the fact that the work refers to or quotes another work, or presupposes knowledge of some historical events, she may not be able to determine the role of some elements. Clarifying words or symbols and providing background information do not determine the specific role of the elements—which remain a matter of interpretation—but rather condition the interpretation. Clarifications and background information are about not the work as a whole, but rather some of its elements, which may partake also in different works and be differently interpreted. For instance, a clarification of a word does not determine the specific role of the word in a given poem. It may appear in different poems and play a different role in each. Interpretation, however, is always unique to the work, and cannot be transferred from one work to another.

There are borderline cases in which the meaning of an element is not determined by linguistic or existing knowledge, but is based on interpreting the particular object. Consider, for instance, the Hebrew word for electricity, HASHMAL. This word appears in the Bible three times and only in the book of Ezekiel (1:4, 1:27, and 8:2). The biblical meaning is, of course, different from the modern meaning of the word. In fact, the modern meaning is rooted in a certain interpretation of the word in its original context, but the exact original meaning is not known. The *King James Version* suggests "colour of amber," while the *New International Version* suggests "glowing metal." Both translations cohere with the context, but they cannot be considered as mere clarifications or translations of this puzzling word. The translation, in this case, is interpretative because it is based on the function of the word within the text as a unified whole, and not on existing knowledge of linguistic norms.

Decoding is likewise relevant to art, but its effectiveness does not depend on the basic need to understand the elements, as in the case of clarification, but on one's theoretical standpoint. The debate over the question whether the artist's intention should determine the work's interpretation is a debate over decoding. Those who hold that the artist's intention is vital to the correct or best understanding of the work propose decoding, not interpreting, as essential to the appreciation of art. According to Danto, "Knowing the artist's interpretation is, in effect, identifying what he or she has made" (1983, 44). He further expresses the hope that his interpretation of Duchamp's work is close enough to Duchamp's own interpretation. The justification of the intentionalist standpoint is not the issue here, but instead its clear categorization: if one is interested, as Danto is, in the artist's original perspective, one is engaged in stating the facts concerning the artist's understanding of the work. But the effort of revealing these facts is not, in itself, an interpretative act.

Art can be associated with interpretation in a different way: the creation of artworks can be described in terms of interpretation, that is, the work itself is an interpretation of the materials it uses. I hold that works of art are essentially interpretative; they offer a specific kind of interpretation of different aspects of life (see Lorand, 2000). However, regarding art as a form of interpretation and as an object for interpretation are two different things. Disclosing the artist's intentions and other related facts, or *repeating* the interpretation the artist had in mind for his or her work, according to my analysis, is not an interpretative act. It is an act of decoding similar to that of the archeologist and the detective. The decoder attempts to follow the footsteps (or the mind) of the artist, state the relevant facts, and unify the object according to the artist's intention. In fact, Danto's position leads us to the conclusion that works of art do not need to be interpreted at all, since the work and its interpretation are one and the same. The viewer is expected to study the work and understand its meaning, but not to construct an interpretation of one's own.

Danto concludes that "[t]here is a truth to interpretation and a stability to works of art which are not relative at all" (1983, 44). It is important to note that Danto identifies stability with having one true interpretation. This identification, I would suggest, works against the very idea of a work's stability. Accepting a variety of interpretations (which are not identical with the work) does not undermine the stability of the work. On the contrary, acknowledging the fact that different interpretations are about the same work indicates the stability of the work, since being stable means withstanding changes without losing the original identity. Accepting that a work may receive different interpretations without losing its identity assumes that there are some basic facts about the work, common to different viewers and interpreters. This assumption entails that there is a text in the class, as Stanley Fish has put it (1980).

In the problem-solving framework, interpretation is not mandatory for a meaningful art experience, although it may enrich the experience. Works of art are meant or expected to be unified wholes, directly perceived, and appreciated without the mediation of interpretation, and it should not come as a surprise that they are often perceived as such. A direct comprehension of a work as a unified whole indicates that the viewer has not discerned anything that undermines the unity of the work. Such a direct comprehension is not necessarily in agreement with the artist's intention or the professional critic's interpretation, but it may nonetheless satisfy the viewer. This is often the case, when the norms of the work and its constitutive elements are familiar and seem relevant to the viewer. It does not mean, however, that art interpretation is redundant. In some cases interpretation conditions a meaningful comprehension of a work. Since art tends to break

old norms, experiment with new styles, themes, and values, and have dialogues with other works of art, it is often the case that contemporary works appear disordered, incomplete, or irrelevant to the audience. The interpreter's task is to reveal a hidden order and teach the audience about the new norms and their function within the work. However, interpretation is effective even if a work seems satisfyingly unified to the viewer, since it may reveal new aspects to the viewer and draw her attention to details that may have past unnoticed. Interpretation teaches the viewer to question the work, examine it from different angles, and exercise her power of judgment by accepting or rejecting the proposed interpretation. Indeed, rejecting an interpretation as a failure forces the viewer to reflect on her original understanding, bring into play new considerations, and as a result, modify or deepen the original understanding. Although interpretation is not a truth-seeking activity, it is a powerful means of learning about the complexity of art, the variety of worldviews, norms, and beliefs, and consequently reflecting on our own complex existence.

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Notes

1. S. H. Olsen, for one, argues that the question, What is the meaning of a work? is not a clear question (1982).
2. Richard Rorty writes: "*interpretation* is an exciting notion only as long as it contrasts with something harder, firmer, less controversial—something like *explanation* or *natural science*" (1991, 102). I agree with Rorty that interpretation needs to be contrasted with other, similar concepts, although I am not sure that these other concepts are less controversial.
3. This is another reason for rejecting the claim that basic data processing is interpretative—since, by definition, basic data processing begins with meaningless impressions.

4. One may argue that a meaningless object raises the question, What is this? Clearly, this is true, but this question does not touch upon anything particular in the object; it rather discloses the viewer's ignorance.