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► **To cite this version:**

Georges Roque. Interpretation in Art. La Lettre de la Maison Française d'Oxford, 2001, 13, pp.141-152. hal-02535639

HAL Id: hal-02535639

<https://hal.science/hal-02535639>

Submitted on 20 Apr 2020

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INTERPRETATION IN ART

Georges Roque

It is a deficiency of at least the English language that there is no single word, applicable over all the arts, for the process of coming to understand a particular work of art.

R. Wollheim

This brief presentation is focused on the most general meanings of interpretation in the field of art. I will examine interpretation first as a part of creation itself, then as a critical understanding of a given artwork, and finally I will discuss some of the problems raised by the theories of interpretation related to the interpretative activity.

What does the term “interpretation” mean when applied to art? Two different issues must be addressed first. (1) The field of arts is not homogeneous, in so far as the problems are different when we deal with music, theatre, literature and fine arts (like painting or sculpture). And (2) “interpretation” is used not only to speak about the reflection *on* a work of art or the meaning *of* a work of art, but also to speak about the creative process itself.

Performing arts and fine arts

To start with performing arts, in the case of music, for which the terms “interpreter” and “to interpret” are both frequently used in various languages, interpretation plays an essential role, as the interpreter is an intermediary between the composer’s score and the public. Theatre is a similar case, although with a difference: we can enjoy reading a play for itself, while we can hardly enjoy reading a score without specific musical training. For this reason, it has been argued that, without being performed, a musical work doesn’t exist for anybody (Leibowitz, 1971: 25). Apart from this difference, every performance of a play is a new interpretation of it.

Now, is there a line to be drawn between performing arts and, say, literature and the fine arts? At first sight, it seems that in the performing arts, interpretation is part of the work of art itself, since the mediation of the interpreter is as essential a part of the work as the score or the text of the play. Nothing similar occurs in the case of literature or fine arts, in so far as a painter or a writer does not in principle assume a similar interpretative role.

In other words, is a painter or a writer an “interpreter” in the same way as an actor or a musician? Despite their numerous differences, some cases of fine arts offer a similarity with that of performing arts. I am thinking for example of an engraving drawn from a painting. It is usually considered that such an engraving is an *interpretation* of the painting which served as its starting point.¹ From this point of view, it seems that for the engraving as well as for a musical or dramatic performance, *the interpretation consists in giving a personal account of something* (score or play in one case, painting in the other). A similar meaning is used when we say that a landscape painting gives a good (or a bad) interpretation of nature. If we accept this general and provisional definition of interpretation as being *a personal account*, the differences between fine and performing arts would be irrelevant from the standpoint of interpretation.

The artist as interpreter

More generally, if we accept that there is an interpretative part in creation itself (either in performing or in fine art and literature), as a consequence we should qualify the traditional distinction between creation and interpretation. Indeed interpretation is usually considered as the activity of the critic, seeking (from outside) to understand the meaning of the artwork. However, my point here is that the word “interpretation” also belongs to the vocabulary used to describe works of art: this common use of language cannot be ignored.

We must therefore address the question of the meaning of “interpretation” when referred to artists. I have already suggested that a creative interpretation is “a personal account of something”, in order to take into account the different cases of the interpretative relationship between

¹ This meaning of “interpretation” is attested in the French Littré Dictionary, ed. 1889 : “Interpréter”, 5° : “ Dans le langage des arts, on dit qu’un graveur interprète bien, interprète mal un tableau ”.

the interpreter and the interpreted object (musician and score, actor and play, engraver and painting).

Indeed, the general meaning of “interpretation” when applied to performing arts (= the way a musical or dramatic play is performed), is also used in the fine arts, when we want to emphasise the personality of the artist. Interestingly, this is the only meaning given to “interprétation” in Réau’s *Dictionnaire d’art et d’archéologie* (1930) (“Interpréter – traduire la nature ou un modèle à sa façon, selon son sentiment personnel”). Such a definition echoes Cézanne’s one (“lire la nature, c’est la voir sous le voile de l’interprétation par taches colorées” (Doran, 1978: 36), and more generally a kind of romantic praise of subjectivity which is still pervasive in the field. According to this view, interpreting would also mean “rendering”. Now, in which sense can we say that interpretation is “creative”? As one of the criteria for creation is novelty, a creative interpretation would be an innovative one. Such a creative interpretation, in turn, is closely related to the personality of the artist. It consists in giving one’s own interpretation. This is common to the different categories of art previously examined: a musician, an actor, a painter, and a writer all have in common, from this point of view, the proposal of a “new” interpretation.

What does “interpretation” mean in such a case? Is it a “renewed” attempt to retrieve the author’s intention, or something else? Interestingly, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines interpretation in art as “the representation of a part in a drama, or the rendering of a musical composition according to one’s conception of the author’s idea”. What seems to me important here is the end of this quote: “according to one’s conception of the author’s idea,” for it means that the artistic interpretation does not aim at a faithful rendering of the author’s intention, but at a *personal* interpretation. This is quite coherent with what we know about interpretation in European music in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which was, by the way, much freer than is usually acknowledged, since an important part was left to the improvisation of the interpreter, in particular concerning the ornamentation of the melody (Pincherle). Yet, ornamentation cannot be considered as related to the composer’s intention in so far as most of them left it to the performer.

If we pursue the idea that the creative interpretation is not necessarily linked to the intention of the author, we might be led to its radical formulation by Harold Bloom, according to whom “poetic influence [...] always proceeds by a misreading of a prior poet, an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation” (Bloom, 1973: 30). However, interpretations in this case are not any more the

performer's own interpretation of a composer's score, but the way poetry (in this case, but it should be also valid for, say, painting or music) evolves through the "influence" of an earlier work. Interpretation, in this sense, is creative in as much as it is a misinterpretation!²

Critics' and historians' interpretations

Could we reconcile such a radical conception of creative interpretation as being the process by which tradition is acknowledged and surpassed by every generation with the interpretative activity of the critic? It depends on the way interpretation is conceived. If we see the latter as an attempt to retrieve the author's intention, it is obviously quite different, for the accent, in creative interpretation, is not on the faithful rendering of the interpreted object, but on the originality of the interpretation. In other words, a creative interpretation (understood as an artistic process) does not seek to be faithful to its source, and it is precisely for this reason that it is creative, whereas the interpretation of the critic is (in principle) more limited and constrained by the meaning of the work it is interpreting. An artistic interpretation takes the interpreted object as a target and a point of departure, whereas for the critic the interpreted object remains the source and the purpose of the interpretative activity.

This difference, however, is due to the nature of the activity more than to interpretation itself, for if we conceive it as the fact of *giving a meaning to something*, there would still be a common feature to both artistic and critical interpretations. Furthermore, there are some intermediary stages, when a critical interpretation tends to be also artistic or poetic, and accordingly blurs the distinction between critical and artistic interpretation.

I noted earlier that the field of art is not homogeneous, but the same should be said about those who interpret the work of the artists. Are critics interpreting in the same way as historians (of art, literature, music,...)? And in the case of painting, what about connoisseurs? It would be too easy to discard them for the reason that their aim would be attribution and not interpretation. As has been noted about the famous Italian connoisseur Morelli, even attribution rests on the understanding, that is, on the interpretation of a painting (Zerner, 1997: 28)).

² It must be noted, however, that Bloom's view is a provocative one, for if we accept the idea that a creative interpretation is a personal account, it is obviously not a misinterpretation. In fact it would only be a misinterpretation as opposed to a very conventional view of interpretation.

I will leave aside the much-debated issue of the differences between critic, art historian and connoisseur, and focus on the different meanings of interpretation in the field of art. Indeed, the definition I suggested earlier—interpreting as giving a meaning to something—is too broad to be satisfying, for it overlaps with that of other activities like understanding or knowing in general. In order to achieve this aim, I am faced with two major difficulties. (1) There is no systematic definition of the word “interpretation” as used in art, so that it is employed together with other alternative and often equivalent terms such as “reading”, “analysis”, “explanation”, “understanding”, and so on. (2) Despite the fact that the use of the word is rarely explicitly defined, it often rests on a theory of interpretation which remains implicit.

Given this, the task of interpreting what interpretation is or could be is regressive, endless, and accordingly useless. So the rest of this paper will be dedicated to a rough survey of some theories of interpretation in art.

Indeed, as long as we define interpretation (in art) as the fact of trying to explain or to grasp the *meaning* of an artwork, everybody will probably agree, but when we ask what that meaning is and where it lies, we will be given many different answers. For instance, is such a meaning conceptual or perceptual? The answer depends on the theoretical position assumed towards interpretation. Some theories consider that the problem of interpretation (of an artwork) is merely conceptual or, say, semantic, so that the perception (of the work) would belong to a first level, which would not require interpretation. Behind this conception lies a presupposition, i.e. that interpretation would be about clarifying ambiguities, which is, by the way, an old definition of interpretation (given, for instance, by d’Alembert at the very beginning of the entry “interpretation” in his *Encyclopaedia*³). From this point of view, interpretation would be excluded from the level of perception, with the possible exception of the well-known cases of cognitive ambiguities (Jastrow’s duck-rabbit, etc.); however, there is no general consensus about whether or not such cases are a matter of interpretation.

³ L’interprétation “ est l’explication d’une chose qui paraît ambiguë ”. Such a definition is still given by Littré, one century later: “ interprétation 2° explication de ce qu’il y a d’obscur ou d’ambigu dans un texte ” (1889 edition).

Description and interpretation

Amongst examples of a position implying pre-interpretative levels, we could include Panofsky. In his well-known methodological scheme of three levels for the understanding of a work of art, (pre-iconographical, iconographical and iconological), Panofsky uses different notions to define each level (even if not always rigorously⁴): the first one, whose objective is identifying pure forms, is considered as a *description*; the second one, which is apprehended by associating artistic motifs with allegorical, literary or religious themes, is termed *analysis*, while “*interpretation*” is reserved for the third level, which concerns the “intrinsic meaning or content” of a work of art (Panofsky, 1970: 66). Such an attitude is quite revealing of a way of understanding the visual still shared by too many art historians. According to this account, what we see in a painting (forms and colours) does not need any kind of interpretation, since it can be described accurately. Even the second, iconographical, stage remains interpretation-free, since a good knowledge of literary sources would guarantee a correct identification of the motifs. This position is very problematic because description takes recognition for granted. Furthermore, the difference between description of a literary text and a picture must be emphasised since the latter rests on recognition, which raises the important and until recently overlooked issue of depiction (Podro, 1998).

An alternative conception consists in considering that, perception being a cognitive process, interpretation would therefore start from the very level of perception. Indeed, it has been argued that perceptual and conceptual levels are narrowly intertwined, so that we can hardly separate them. Furthermore, according to this (cognitive) standpoint, perception already implies interpretation. However, the meaning of “interpretation” here is different from that used in the previous case. To say that the brain must interpret the data given by the senses means that interpretation is a process of construction of meaning. What we know today of the way the brain processes data coming from the senses is good evidence of interpretation as construction of meaning, since the visual image, for instance is not “impressed”, so to speak, in the brain, but is the result of a

⁴ This is very clear in the synoptic table, (Panofsky, 1970: 66); however, Panofsky also speaks of “interpretation” when referring to the first two levels (see for example footnote 3 p. 61.)

very complex process in which shapes, movement and colour are processed separately in order to yield the “unified” image we “see” (Zeki, 2000: 102). Interestingly, the old model of perception this new conception challenges still governs many of the implicit theories of interpretation in art. Indeed, such a model rests on the distinction between sensation and understanding, or the idea that there is first a passive recording of data, which are then, in a second stage, “interpreted” by the brain. Yet the same kind of opposition is being used about art when we draw a line between a level of description of the work of art, which corresponds to its “objective” perception, and another one that corresponds to the analysis and interpretation of the work. Here again, if we favour a theory of interpretation for which interpreting means clarifying semantic ambiguities, and since there are usually no such ambiguities at the level of the mere “description” of the work, so interpretation is confined to a “superior” level, that of the (semantic) meaning of the work. Conversely, if we favour a theory of interpretation as construction (and opposed to retrieval) of the meaning of the work, such a construction starts from the very level of the description of the work, since describing is already interpreting.

There is here an evident shift between the two kinds of theories, a shift that depends on their position towards perception as well as interpretation. The first one (variously named by those who analyse and criticise it, “transparent theory,” (Danto, 1983: 27 ss) “scrutiny theory,” (Wollheim, 1993: 132) “adequational theory” (Margolis, 1995: 24)), implies that the level of description of the work doesn’t raise issues of interpretation. The latter, however—let’s call it “constructive”—qualifies the distinctions on which the former rests, such as form/content (since forms would be the vehicle of content, i.e. meaning), signifier/signified (again, the signifier would be transparent, without meaning in itself, since it would just lead to the signified/content), or equally description/interpretation.

If the meaning is at least partly constructed by the viewer/reader/auditor, so the difference between a level of description and a level of interpretation loses most of its pertinence. According to this conception, the meaning is constructed from the very level of the perception of the work of art. In other words, *what we interpret is already an interpretation.*

Intentions

Now, an important issue has been left aside: what do we mean when we speak of the “meaning” of the work? A very common answer is

that the meaning of an artwork is given by the author, so that the task of interpretation consists in retrieving the author's intention. Such a complicated task has been ridiculed by Beardsley and Wimsatt in their seminal article "The Intentional fallacy" (1954), an article still being used to criticise the author's intention (Lyas, 1992). However, they fight against a narrow conception of intention as "design or plan in the author's mind" (Beardsley and Wimsatt, 1962: 92). We can hardly reject the complex issue of intention on these grounds.

Indeed, the issue of the intention of the author has been transformed in recent years in two complementary directions. (1) Besides the intention of the author, we should take into account the intention of the text (coined by U. Eco *intentio operis*) as well as the intention of the interpreter (*intentio lectoris*), the three kinds of intention being closely interrelated (Eco, 1991). (2) Similarly, beyond intention, the concept of intentionality itself has been broadened in order to include, besides intention as "purpose", Intentionality (capitalised) as "that property of the mind by which it is *directed at, about or of* objects or states of affairs in the world" (Searle, 1994: 379). Such a conception has a great relevance for interpretation in art, since the Intentional may therefore be equated with the cultural in general (Margolis, 1995: n.5 p. 268) or gives renewed strength to the intentionalist position (Schaeffer, 1996, 77 ss; 284 ss). Practically, intention has proved to be a fruitful methodological approach, when understood, not as a state of mind inside the head of an author, but rather as "a relation between an object and its circumstances" (Baxandall, 1985: 42).

Understanding and interpretation

Another problem, when interpretation is understood as an explanation of the meaning of the artwork, is to determine whether meaning and interpretation are one and the same thing, or if meaning is the object of interpretation? If we favour the latter option, it follows that we must separate the meaning of the work from its interpretation. This means that interpretation is a step further, since the general understanding of the work would not require interpretation. In other words, in the same way as we saw a difference between description and interpretation, so another similar distinction should be drawn between *understanding*—understood in a particular meaning--and *interpretation*. According to Hirsch, for example, the *understanding* of the work gives access to its *meaning*, whereas its *interpretation* makes it possible to grasp its *significance*. This position is interesting, for it goes against the idea that interpretation seeks the

“meaning” of the work.⁵ For Hirsch, indeed (as well as others, too) meaning belongs to a level previous to interpretation, the level of “understanding”, i.e. “a perception or construction of the author’s verbal meaning, nothing more, nothing less” (Hirsch, 1967: 143). Thus the understanding of the meaning of a work requires the mastery of linguistic conventions, the knowledge of the language in which the work has been written, etc. Interestingly, even if Hirsch clearly conceives the understanding of meaning as a construction, this construction is not evaluative, since evaluation belongs to the realm of “significance”: “one understands meaning; one judges significance”(Hirsch, 1967: 143).

According to such a view, interpretation is detached from meaning and consists in a kind of “meta” activity of judging, weighing and evaluating the meaning produced by the understanding. This makes interpretation an activity closely related to criticism and considered as subjective, since the significance of a work of art would be an evaluation of what the work means *for me*. Such a distinction between two levels, one more “internal”, the other “external” is more in use in the field of literary studies where the subjective features of interpretation are generally acknowledged. Conversely, in the domain of the visual arts, “criticism” is usually seen as the name for a purely evaluative activity.

The distinction between understanding—as understood in this particular way—and interpretation (as well as that between description and interpretation), presupposes a pre-interpretative level, which is sometimes explicitly considered as protection against the relativity of meaning. Indeed, the presupposition of a stable, fixed and unambiguous auctorial meaning is a way of preserving the “objective” meaning of the text and protecting it against the abuses of “subjective” interpretation. Such an opposition is at least implicitly present in most distinctions between the meaning of the text and its interpretation (see Ricoeur, 1986, who opposes *poetics*, the study of a text *per se*, and *hermeneutics*, its interpretation). Furthermore, the frequent definition of interpretation as *translation*⁶ carries the same presupposition: the meaning of an object is not in question, since the problem is “only” its translation into another language.⁷ More generally, the difference between understanding and interpretation rests on a traditional

⁵ For him, “just as understanding is a *construction* of meaning, so interpretation is an *explanation* of meaning” (Hirsch, 1967: 136).

⁶ It is, by the way, the first meaning given by *Littré*.

⁷ See RICOEUR, 1986: 151, “interpréter, c’est traduire une signification d’un contexte culturel à l’autre selon une règle présumée d’équivalence de sens”.

line drawn between natural sciences (that explain) as opposed to human sciences (that interpret). This is probably the reason why the explanation (or understanding, according to Hirsh's terminology) of a literary text is supposed to be more objective than its interpretation. It must be noted that the rejection of the sharp distinction between understanding and interpretation does not necessarily mean that all understanding is interpretation, as has been claimed. On the contrary, it seems important to maintain the differences they have without considering explanation (or understanding) as univocal truth (Shusterman, 1991).

Up to now, we have taken it for granted that interpretation is a kind of explanation, either of the meaning of an artwork, or of its evaluative criticism. However, not all theories of interpretation in art aim to explain it: a different theory should be added, that championed by Arthur Danto, who considers it as being *constitutive* of the work of art, and thus opposed to the theories he considers as being *explanatory* (Danto, 1986: 44-45). His conception is one of the most radical views on interpretation in so far as, for him, interpretation not only transforms its object—a claim he shares with the “constructivist” approach—but constitutes it as such. In other words, from specific examples, in particular Duchamp's ready made and Warhol's Brillo boxes, Danto considers that the interpretation is what transforms a material object (a urinal, a bicycle wheel, a snow shovel and so on) into a work of art. This radical thesis is coherent with the claim of the importance of top-down knowledge in cognitive science. In the same way as this knowledge plays an important part in our perception and interpretation of the world, similarly, our knowledge affects not only the meaning of the work, but may constitute the work itself in particular circumstances closely related to modern art. Hence the claim made by Danto that interpretation is constitutive of the work of art.

In this brief presentation, I have drawn a broad picture of different interpretative theories in art. There is no general conclusion to be drawn, except that speaking of “theories of interpretation” is very deceptive for it supposes that there would be at least a minimal agreement about what interpretation is. However, even in a limited and supposedly homogeneous field like art, there are conceptions so radically different that they have hardly anything in common.

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