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Morris Weitz

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Weitz, Morris (1916-1981), American philosopher of aesthetics who focused primarily on ontology, interpretation, and literary criticism.

Weitz' Initial Theory of Art. Morris Weitz' initial theory of art was provided in his book, *Philosophy of the Arts* (Weitz 1950). Here Weitz calls his theory of art “empirical” and “organic,” and he defined “art” as “an organic complex or integration of expressive elements embodied in a sensuous medium” (51). By “empirical” he means that his theory answers to the evidence provided by actual works of art. “Organic,” for Weitz, means that each element is to be considered in relation to the others in a living and not merely mechanical way. Weitz also has a broad understanding of “expressive,” which refers to an artistic property that functions as a semiotic sign, either of a specific emotional feeling, an emotional quality, or another sign of an emotional feature. These expressive signs are at once presentational and representational in his view, by which he means that they both *are* something and are *about* something (at the very least they are about emotion or emotional qualities). In this way his early theory of the art object can be classified as a formalist one that expands upon the traditions of Clive Bell and Roger Fry in a way that deepens the concept of form so that it provides particular kinds of emotional content, thereby incorporating the theories of John Dewey and a list of practicing artists and critics that includes DeWitt Parker, A.C. Bradley, Albert Barnes, Martha Graham, Frank Lloyd Wright and others. Indeed, in Weitz' initial theory form and content are identical; he denies that in art these are separable dichotomies, since both refer to the “what” and the “how” of an artwork as a whole (see 48-9).

Weitz' Revised Theory of Art. Weitz explicitly modified the above theory of art in his 1956 article, "The Role of Theory in Aesthetics," which was one of the Matchette Foundation prize essays for 1955. In this article he overturned his original claim in *Philosophy of the Arts* that his empirical and organic theory could produce a closed or real definition of art. It is this revised version that many philosophers have considered the *sine qua non* in support of the position that theories of art should be "open." Supporters of this view, for similar but non-identical reasons, included W.B. Gallie, W. E. Kennick and Benjamin R. Tilghman. Detractors included M.H. Abrams, M.W. Beal, Lee Brown, George Dickie, and Maurice Mandelbaum. A longer list of philosophers who addressed the issue of defining art in the late 1950s through the early 1970s can be found in Kennick 1979, 123-4.

An "open" definition, on Weitz' view, is not merely a convenience for avoiding the difficulty of identifying necessary and sufficient conditions. Instead Weitz claims that there *can be no* closed definition of art because art is the kind of product and enterprise that is so creative, adventurous and ever-changing that no closed set of defining properties or conditions can be found. Weitz' claim is that the concept of art is open because "art" is a concept like "game," as described by the later Wittgenstein, that names an artifact of cultural practice or language that requires the consent of those who participate in the practice in order to determine what falls within and what falls outside of the purview of that concept. (See Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*.) In short, his point is that art is the sort of concept that requires that any new or emerging artwork be subject to a decision on the part of the art-competent agents involved about whether or not to either extend the existing concept of art to cover it, to reject it as "not art," or to amend the

existing concept of art so that it can include the new work. Since there can be no necessary and sufficient conditions for how to apply the concept of art to new cases, there can be no real definition of art in Weitz' view.

Weitz thus abandons the view that the definition of art he provided in *Philosophy of the Arts* captures everything art is or could be. He continued to endorse the idea, however, that expressive, semiotic significance is important for understanding art. In fact, Weitz suggests that existing definitions of art are not without value in the sense that we can mine them for their insights about the important features of artworks. His recommendation is simply that rather than accept these definitions as closed, we instead see these definitional strategies as recommendations for us to attend to whatever features are highlighted by the theory at hand. An irony is that in claiming that *art* must resist all definitions of the “necessary-and-sufficient-condition” sort, Weitz has provided at least a necessary condition for new *theories* of art: that they must, in all cases, be open definitions.

Interpretation and Truth Claims. In his article, “Does Art Tell the Truth?” and in chapter eight of *Philosophy of the Arts* Weitz asks if art can embody truth claims. His answer is “yes,” particularly in reference to literature, which can be linguistically referential and thus make claims about the world that are either true or false. Besides these first-order truth claims, Weitz holds that works of literature can also have second-order “depth meanings,” by which he means that they contain meanings that imply the truth of claims not explicitly stated. An example he gives is Richard Wright’s novel, *Native Son*, which despite the absence of explicit statement, can be interpreted to make claims that can be proven either true or false, such as claims about the

capacity of the modern man to make free choices that are not destructive. Non-linguistic arts such as painting, Weitz claims, can also make truth claims, but they do so through the use of symbols. As to music Weitz is less certain; the most he will say is that some music contains analogues of truth claims, by which he means, for example, that a musical piece such as Beethoven's last quartet, Opus 135, could be (and indeed was) interpreted by critics and by Beethoven himself to mean something analogous to "life is good" or "that affirmation of life is the answer to doubt" (Weitz 1950, 152). If this is right then music can make at least overall assertions or truth claims. One could imagine, in light of this, that any music that could be conceived as representational or metaphorical in some way, such as Billy Strayhorn's "Take the 'A Train'" (made famous by Duke Ellington) or that is a hybrid of story and music, such as Sergei Prokofiev's "Peter and the Wolf," could be conceived as providing musical assertions or truth claims that do not differ too much from those found in literature. These musical pieces, for example, could be conceived of as making a musical statement about the qualitative nature of urban train riding or about the audacity and bravery of little boys. For arts like dance and theatre one can speculate that Weitz would find that they can also embody truth claims – linguistically, symbolically, or (like some music) via analogues to truth claims.

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[*Note to editors: If this is too long we can cut "Does Art Tell the Truth?" which is duplicated for the most part in *The Philosophy of the Arts*. The articles on Goodman, Langer and aesthetic education could also be cut if space is needed.]

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