

PHILOSOPHY, ARTS AND THE ACQUISITION OF KNOWLEDGE

Philosophy and science function as a source of knowledge, a product of a cognitive process that has strictly a propositional character. This kind of knowledge can only be expressed in propositional statements about matters of fact, which, in turn, implies that we acquire the insight of what is true or untrue only if this can be rendered in propositional language. The issue involved in an old but enduring debate is whether art can also be a source of knowledge. Can for instance arts, visual arts in particular, access moral truths? In that case, can art produce knowledge based solely on propositional statements, or can that be conveyed in another way, namely non-propositional?

The above and other pertaining questions of the sort «What do we learn from works of art?», or «Can we obtain knowledge through art independently or supplementally to philosophy?», are all relevant to the problem of the acquisition of knowledge. The dominant theory of knowledge entails a complex cognitive process which should satisfy three necessary and sufficient conditions: truth, justification and belief. Thus, knowledge is defined as a «justified true belief». We learn truths about actual things when related proposals are supported by evidence and solid argumentation. A philosopher must support his hypothesis and defend his tenets in terms of the justifiable truth of propositional statements. Moreover, what is argued for should be presented in a language explicit and understood in an objective and standard manner, something that only human language, spoken or written, can put across effectively. Consequently, statements or propositions are plausible only if expressed through a linguistic medium. Arts employ their own ways of expressing and communicating ideas and beliefs which for the most part, narrative forms aside, are not transferred to the viewer in the aforementioned standard and objective manner. As a result, artistic statements are not interpreted in the same way by everyone, since viewers, whose experiences are only incidentally related to the artist's own, use mainly their personal judgment in the process of artistic understanding. But if art does not make use of an explicit and standard language, how can it argue for the truths it might suggest? Argumentation is imperative in the learning process. Otherwise, we can be simply affected, not enlightened. Furthermore, if personal judgment has a deciding and determining influence in the learning process, then the objectivity of knowledge is under dispute. On the other hand, philosophical

and scientific knowledge relies on the objectivity of the propositional statements. Although, as Louis Arnaud Reid has succinctly pointed out, personal judgment is present even in the attainment of scientific knowledge, the truth is ultimately controlled by «impersonal matter of fact»¹.

A specific issue arising in the above context is whether art, given its limitations on asserting statements in terms of propositional truth, is deficient in conveying not only new but also old truths. If it is implausible for a work of art to produce new and undiscovered knowledge, due to the lack of objectivity and justification essential to the learning process, can it at least access some already known truths without using propositional language? A relevant question concerns the possibility of accessing knowledge, particularly ethical or moral truths, beyond the traditional path of justified true belief.

Before attempting to discuss the above questions, we should take into consideration the different modes of communication regarding the various art forms. Arts, such as literature, drama, poetry and film, which usually employ a narrative style and use more or less the human language, can utilise that capacity in order to state a proposition and express a statement in an explicit way. Narrative arts can easily emulate an essayistic pattern of human speech and get a message or idea across efficiently. Even poetry, which uses the metrical structure of verse, can express beliefs and ideas making use of human speech yet less explicitly. Furthermore, prose poetry or free verse, using the rhythm of natural speech, is not less efficient than prose itself in that manner. In that sense, an author, dramatist or filmmaker, using narration, dialogue or monologue, can be assumed as being capable to simulate philosophical discourse in the pursuit of the objective presentation of truth. On the contrary, other arts, such as painting, music, sculpture, or photography, can only suggest ideas in a visual or music language which can rather be interpreted subjectively. Presuming that truths can be communicated only through the explicitness and plainness of human language, a hypothesis bringing to mind Wittgenstein's thoughts on language, arts like painting, sculpture and music cannot articulate and support a conceptual truth. They can describe life facts but cannot argue in favour or against them. For this reason, they can only generate emotions and possibly motivate the viewer or the audience to ponder and contemplate, without providing access to a particular truth an artist had in mind. Composers cannot express a conceptual idea, for instance a moral belief, since in music there are neither words transmitted nor action perceived. They can only infuse their own emotional state into a piece of music and expect audience to react suitably. We can feel grief, pain, fear, exhilaration, excitement or even hope and that is all. Music can motivate us

1. L. A. READ, Art and Knowledge, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 25, 1985, p. 123.

to think about an experience, personal or fictional, to imagine a situation or even move into action. If a piece of music is truly inspirational, it might even induce a philosopher or a thinker to contemplate about a philosophical idea. But such an idea will differ depending on the individual. How we react in response to music or what we think is very subjective. Even if there is a well defined theme, such as Beethoven's ninth symphony with verses taken from Schiller's *Ode to Joy*, an individual's thoughts regarding the theme of joy and its relevance is a matter of personal interpretation. In that context, narrative artworks have an advantage over other forms. Since narration in most of the cases engages the power of human language, the main and most representative conveyer of concepts and ideas, narrative artworks have the potential to access propositional knowledge if they could also provide argumentation and evidence. Only if narrative art satisfies the criterion of argumentation can it provide access to philosophical knowledge, such as moral knowledge.

I

The most common arguments against the hypothesis that art can be a source of knowledge concern its lack of capacity to use propositional language. Art, which is mainly representational, cannot argue for a truth and supply the required evidence². Since an artist's beliefs cannot be communicated clearly and directly to the viewer or reader, their meaning is open to personal interpretation and, thus, they cannot claim to any epistemic legitimacy. Therefore, art cannot have any significance in terms of accessing and conveying knowledge and, to that extent, as a factor contributing to learning. Some scholars, like Jerome Stolnitz, argue that art is cognitively trivial. There is nothing significant to learn from art regarding life, society, history, religion etc., which cannot be learned from other sources³. This view is based mainly on the belief that art can only show something without asserting it. In other words, it lacks the ability to express declarative statements since most of art media use non-linguistic ways of communication. Furthermore, art's aesthetic nature determines that its function is mainly emotional, not cognitive. Art is not fact-stating, nor does it have the

2. This view revolves around what is called «cognitive significance» thesis, which maintains that, in order for an artwork to have any learning value, it must articulate its statements in terms of propositional truth. A thesis supported by Douglas Morgan who questions the learning value of art: D. MORGAN, Must Art Tell the Truth?, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 26, 1967, pp. 17-27.

3. J. STOLNITZ, On the Cognitive Triviality of Art, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 32, 1992, pp. 191-200.

ability or inclination to defend a conceptual truth with arguments. Even in the case of a narrative medium that has the potential of expressing conceptual statements, the artist does not seem to have as a purpose to defend his position argumentatively.

The basic point of the above analysis is that art does not convey any truth which is not already known, so it does not contribute to the acquisition of new knowledge. According to Noël Carroll, art only recycles truisms that we already know. This kind of knowledge does not have much value as to be considered educational; it is mainly trivial⁴. Carroll presents three arguments against the notion that art and literature can function as a source of knowledge. The first argument, which he calls «banality argument», concerns the above mentioned triviality of the art. He argues that art cannot be a source of moral knowledge but nevertheless it can activate «antecedently possessed knowledge». The second argument is called the «no-evidence argument». It purports that for any knowledge to be legitimate it must be supported by evidence. Carroll gives a particular emphasis on literature, a narrative medium which has at least the potential to express propositional statements since it makes use of human language. However, it cannot, according to Carroll, be a reliable source of evidence. It may suggest a hypothesis or general truth, but that is not true knowledge since art cannot confirm, justify or provide any solid evidence for it⁵. This is an argument which, as I have already mentioned above, refers to art's deficiency in producing propositional statements. The third objection presented by Carroll is called the «non-argument argument» which also refers to the above mentioned limitations and art's aesthetic nature. Artworks may suggest general truths but do not engage in an argumentative analysis in their defense, something which is prerequisite to genuine knowledge.

Carroll's objections are in line with the notion, shared by many, that art cannot produce knowledge in the sense of «justified true belief». The primary objection is the lack of justification. Artworks do not supply evidence and do not engage in argumentation. However, art is not completely useless in conveying general truths. Lamarque and Olsen are among the critics who claim that art, particularly a narrative medium like literature, can imply truths which, however, do not impart knowledge. They maintain that literature can communicate general beliefs which only motivate and organise the writing of the text. As a partial argument, they present the fact that critics do not generally debate in favour or against alleged truths found in literary works⁶.

4. N. CARROLL, The Wheel of Virtue: Art, Literature, and Moral Knowledge, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 60, 2002, p. 4.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

6. P. LAMARQUE, S. OLSEN, *Truth, Fiction and Literature*, Oxford, Oxford UP, 1994, pp. 323-324.

Carroll, on the other hand, includes both critics and the artists in the debate regarding the missing critical discourse and argumentation which authenticates a truth disclosed in an artwork⁷. I would say that what is most considerable is the lack of argumentation on the part of the artist. If artists could argue in favour of ideas and truths presented in their work, assuming that they could use propositional language, then it could be said that their work functions as a source of knowledge. Literary and art criticism, or even a philosophical conversation, could follow afterwards as a result of the artist's particular endeavour. In that context, some critics and scholars claim that although a work of art cannot be called philosophical since it does not satisfy the necessary condition of argumentation, it can, nevertheless, express ethical or moral truths. According to D. D. Raphael, that is feasible through the exploration of moral issues. No matter how appropriate it is to call or reduce a great piece of poetry or literature to moral philosophy, such arts can provide moral examples and, therefore, assume a supportive role in moral understanding. Raphael actually implies that it depends on the writers to step in and pursue a concept or support moral positions by providing concrete examples and constructing supportive arguments. However, the contribution of an artwork to moral philosophy is rather «tangential»⁸. Art, narrative arts in particular, as we shall discuss, may deepen our moral understanding, but it cannot, by any means, replace philosophical inquiry.

The dominant notion about art's aesthetic character does not exclude the possibility of accessing already known truths. Despite art's deficiency in unearthing undiscovered knowledge as well as in presenting arguments and supporting evidence, art indeed invites debate upon moral issues through the centuries. Even if art does not function as a source of knowledge, it can excite and motivate the viewer to get actively involved in accessing truths already known or under consideration. In other words, the reader of a novel, or the audience of a film, can dispute or accept old concepts, or even look at them in a new perspective. There are arguments in favour of the notion that art can provide examples of moral situations which resemble real life experiences. Since art's function is primarily emotional, the viewer or the reader would be emotionally stimulated to respond to moral issues and accept or reject associated moral beliefs. As Carroll claims, emotions «play a role in our discerning, refining, and identifying the virtues»⁹. He even suggests that since literary examples are more simplified, concrete, as well as rich in

7. N. CARROLL, *supra*, p. 6.

8. D. D. RAPHAEL, Can Literature be Moral Philosophy?, *New Literary History*, 15, 1983, pp. 1-15.

9. N. CARROLL, *supra*, p. 18.

motives, feelings and behaviours, they can be more effective in clarifying moral issues than abstract philosophical arguments. In such a way, art does not only access knowledge, but it can also refine it. What Carroll actually implies here is that we can be more easily stimulated by art to contemplate a moral concept than by the austere and epistemic character of philosophy. Through the power of aesthetic experience and derived emotions, we can easily identify and connect with the plights and achievements of the characters depicted in an artwork which, although fictional, are also rich in detail and resemble real people. By way of personal identification and emotional attachment, we can be more easily motivated to respond and evaluate situations and concepts. It is worth emphasising that a narrative artwork can activate our feelings and moral beliefs about particular real life situations as well as our disposition to moral issues, but it cannot produce new moral knowledge. Carroll claims that art and literary works can be regarded as «thought experiments», analogous to philosophical thought experiments, which motivate the viewer to employ conceptual discrimination of his/her «virtue schemas» and identify virtue concepts¹⁰. Thus, the viewer becomes aware of previously attained knowledge regarding moral virtues.

I would agree that art and literature works can construe imaginative situations which motivate us to explore and sometimes redefine our values. Even a controversial work of art, functioning as a counterexample to an established belief, can provoke a debate about a social or moral issue, which in turn prompts us to rethink prevailing moral values. Art may not have the capacity to engage viewers in a rigorous conceptual analysis full of arguments and counterarguments, but it can, nevertheless, have a moralising effect on them. It cannot produce new moral concepts, since even narrative art media do not by nature employ an argumentation process necessary for stating propositional truths, but at least it may induce us to recollect and reorganise what we already know. Since art's main function is emotional, it can only stimulate familiar feelings and motivate us to search and recall already known concepts. But the creation and formal structuring of new concepts requires the presence of arguments which is a work of cognition. Hence, art can have only a supportive role in moral or philosophical understanding. That role lies in the activation, triggered primarily by the emotions, of pre-existing knowledge. What follows, namely reassessment, acceptance or rejection, and possible reconstruction of personal convictions and moral concepts, is mainly a function of the intellect. At that time, a particular artwork is not sufficient to provide us with the tools for further exploration and we must request the assistance of philosophical discourse,

10. N. CARROLL, *supra*, pp. 18-19.

thus resorting to the authority of philosophy and other social sciences. In that sense and up to that extent, art can access moral knowledge and contribute to moral education.

However, many philosophers, dated back to Plato, argue that artworks can mislead the viewer to deceptive concepts and ultimately to immoral beliefs. Their main objection lies in the fact that viewers interpret an artistic message subjectively without the authenticity of a solid argumentation. Therefore, they cannot subject a proposed concept to a genuine criticism. Art imitates life and fictitious situations which simulate but do not correspond to true facts. The discrepancy could be a factor of misjudgment on the part of the viewer. In addition, the artistic experience can play a role in developing imaginative empathy towards certain fictional characters and situations which, in turn, can lead to empathic beliefs not justified by true facts. In that respect, art can be morally exploitive or detrimental. Artworks, aesthetically valuable, may be praised for their artistic value, but criticised for their moral defectiveness. There are two main views in art criticism regarding the aesthetic and ethical value of an artwork. *Radical autonomism* claims that it is inappropriate to access artworks in terms of ethical or cognitive value. On this account, we value art for its own sake independently of any questions about cognition, morality, politics, etc. On the other hand, *moderate autonomism* contends that artistic and ethical evaluation of an artwork are distinct functions, so it is possible to criticise it for its artistic value independently from its moral defect or merit. There are two challenges to this account: ethicism maintains that, all things considered, an ethical flaw in an artwork is also an aesthetic defect, while *moderate moralism* claims that sometimes, but not always, an ethical flaw can be an artistic defect while a moral virtue can be an aesthetic virtue¹¹.

The above controversy signifies the fact that art might exert a moral influence, positive or negative, depending on the concepts, ideas and issues an artwork communicates to us. However, I contend that we can be affected only to the degree an artwork motivates us to recollect and reevaluate our own beliefs. An artistic masterpiece may be more effective in stirring up feelings and emotions or eliciting responses, but that fact does not indicate that we will be misled by art. In other words, a great piece of art, regardless of the intentions or convictions of the artist, cannot necessarily affect our judgment. We will not be carried away by its aesthetic power, which certainly makes it more appealing and easy to identify with characters or behaviours, and we will not be caught up in its ideas since an artwork

11. For a full account, cf. N. CARROLL, Art and Ethical Criticism, *Ethics*, 110, 2000, pp. 350-387.

cannot provide justified true beliefs. The argumentation and evidence issue, which is the most crucial in accessing knowledge and formulate truths, is an omnipresent and determining factor. That is, the artist cannot convince us for the right of his or her beliefs if he or she cannot provide solid arguments and support them with evidence. We admire and enjoy the aesthetic beauty of an artwork but, if at the same time we are appalled by its defective moral concepts, we will not accept its propositions. When we read a novel or a poem, watch a film or a drama –just a few examples of narrative art that has a potential to convey conceptual statements– the appreciation of its aesthetic virtue occurs simultaneously with the evaluation of its moral or other messages. We come to assess an idea through our own dispositions, personal beliefs and moral values. If we disagree or even feel outraged, because of our preconceived ideas about a particular issue, it is certain that we will reject it on the basis of its ethical value, even if we appreciate its artistic merit. Most of the time, our view and opinion about an artwork will be determined by its ethical, social or political ideas than by its aesthetic virtue. However, the opposite also holds true. An aesthetically poor artwork might have been disregarded before having been appreciated for its ethical merit if it cannot engage our attention. In that respect, the role of the aesthetic elements should not be understated.

Art, certainly, as I pointed out earlier, can activate the brainstorming of concepts and ideas and even initiate a process of reassessment and rejection of our own convictions. But the reconsideration of our beliefs can only occur through a subsequent discussion involving exchanging and debating ideas with others, as well as the decisive involvement of philosophy, politics, and other social sciences. Reevaluating our ideas is the result of a long and complicated cognitive process and it does not involve simply an exposure to a particular artwork that cannot support the purported ideas with evidence. Things would be different if art could not only produce new knowledge but supply it with argumentation and support it with evidence. However, as it will be discussed, this is not the function of art *qua* art. In that context, art cannot deceive us if we do not want to be deceived. Moreover, there are other philosophers, dated back to Aristotle and his emotional catharsis account, who claim that art can have a beneficial effect on one's character and morally educate him. Nevertheless, I maintain that even in the case of a morally beneficial artwork, it is not the function of art but the intervention of philosophy and other social sciences that will eventually enhance our moral understanding. We adopt a proposal and embrace a moral truth only through cognition, not through the emotions. Emotional responses may initiate a cognitive process that is dependent on philosophy and science for formulating propositional truths; a cognitive process, indispensable to moral education, which in any case can be triggered independently of artistic stimulation.

At this stage it is suffice to contend that art contributes to moral and philosophical understanding only accidentally by activating antecedently

possessed knowledge which in turn may prompt a further cognitive inquiry. That is primarily an unintended consequence of an artist's effort to engage the viewer aesthetically, even if the creator of an artwork has as an immediate or ulterior motive to get a message across or communicate an idea that comes secondary to the aesthetic experience generated by the work itself. Moreover, he or she cannot argue in favour of his or her beliefs or introduce a new moral or other concept, because artistic language does not supply him or her with the appropriate tools, namely argumentation and evidence. A novelist or a filmmaker can certainly philosophise but their work will not be philosophy since it is bereft of argumentative analysis. That is even more true in the case of an art medium, such as painting, which almost completely lacks the use of human language. A painting, certainly, can convey concepts or beliefs already known to us since we approach a picture through our life experiences. Grant Wood, an American regionalist painter, in the mural *When Tillage Begins*, even inscribes a quote from a speech by statesman Daniel Webster –thus a belief already possessed by the viewer– to articulate his message: «When tillage begins other arts follow. The farmers therefore are the founders of human civilisation». The theme, the aesthetic strength of the painter's technique, and Webster's quote, combined with the secondary themes of succeeding through hard work and moral courage, are all connected to signify the importance of agrarian life. According to James Dennis, the subject matter of the mural is a strong advocate of technological development of farming through research and field experiments¹². However, the thematic concept does not communicate any new belief and only presents a previously known idea.

In addition, the subjectivity that characterises a viewer's approach to art impedes the interpretation of an artist's intentions. Two different individuals, depending on their personal experiences and dispositions, will most likely look at Degas' *The Milliners* from a different perspective and be prompted to a different conceptual analysis. One would be probably absorbed by the brightness of the foreground with the colourful ribbons, something that suggests the world of fashion and the enjoyment of life, while the other can focus on the dullness of the background and the two silhouette-looking hat makers which may suggest the hard labour and the difficulties in earning a living. Artistic truths are ambiguous since they are conveyed through the use of an aesthetic language full of imagery. Hence, these truths are contingent on subjective interpretation. In any event, an artwork cannot produce new knowledge since it cannot introduce truths supported by legitimate justification but only already known concepts submitted to our subjective judgment. If an

12. J. M. DENNIS, *Grant Wood*, Columbia, MO, Univ. of Missouri Press, 1986, p. 227.

artist with a philosophical inclination chooses an artistic medium to introduce a new concept, something that is more plausible in the case of literature or any other art that utilises the human language, then, his ideas will be lost «in translation»; impossible to comprehend without a clear propositional language and the support of solid argumentation.

Furthermore, art is self-limiting. There is nothing more there than what is depicted on the page of a novel, on the canvas of a painting, on the stage of a play or in the motion picture reel. What we see in a painting is exactly the subject matter enclosed by the frame itself and nothing more. On the contrary, philosophy can be likened with the Russian dolls. Any newly discovered truth encloses an older one inside. A new theory springs out of a pre-existing one. A moral concept generates questions to be answered in an everlasting expansion of knowledge. An answer to a particular issue is always greeted by a new question and so on. Plato's idealism was met by Aristotle's realism, followed by a succession of numerous philosophical movements. Human thought is only limited by infinite horizons. An artwork, as opposed to philosophical thought, cannot expand but stays still. It is autonomous and it does not generate philosophical questions that can be answered by the art itself. It can present us with issues or questions but only regarding its artistic nature. Any questions and issues of cognitive nature, if activated by an artwork, will be the subject of philosophical inquiry. In that sense, art can develop and change its forms and styles but only from an aesthetic point of view without producing any conceptual knowledge. Fauvism is a development of Post-Impressionism and Constructivism a development of Futurism, but they do not produce new knowledge about morality, human nature or life. A philosopher, as soon as he presents and argues for a new theory, might contemplate another one as an expansion or revision of the first, which, in turn, prompts him to further philosophical investigation. Aristotle's account of friendship could not have been formulated without the previous discussion on virtue. An artist can create another work that will be connected to his previous one only stylistically or thematically, but otherwise it will remain autonomous. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* could have all the same been written before *Romeo and Juliet* and even before any other of his tragedies.

II

I argued above that an artist cannot express new philosophical ideas in a comprehensible and convincing manner. But what if a philosopher, who might also be an artist or possess an artistic talent, chooses an art medium, for instance literature or film so as to utilise the human language, in order to express a new concept or thought in addition or even independently of his philosophical writings?

A major objection to the hypothesis regarding art's philosophical potential

refers to the function of art which is mainly emotional. When we are viewing an artwork our emotions are stirred, while *reason* is dormant. Art appeals primarily to emotions, not to cognition. That is an aesthetic argument which states that art should not be viewed from a cognitive perspective. Art functions as art *qua* art. Otherwise, it contradicts its own nature. That means that any account of knowledge provided by art must appeal directly to aesthetic experience. If, for instance, a narrative art medium employed argumentation in the process of introducing new moral truths, then it would exceed its own limits. Most likely, it would have to utilise plain language without the aesthetic influence in order to express a concept and support it with the appropriate rational arguments. In that context, a novel or a play would be stripped off the qualities that define its artistic nature, at least to the extent of its philosophical venture or the length of conceptual analysis. In that case, it is virtually impossible to talk of art *qua* art.

Art can be made purposefully philosophical but still, for all intents and purposes, it will not be philosophy. If a philosopher decides on using an art medium to convey a theory, the product of his endeavour will be either bad philosophy or not art at all. It is a Wittgensteinian belief that philosophical problems arise because of the poor use of language. In that case, art, which is very vague in the use of language, cannot express philosophical truths clearly. If propositional language is used, then art becomes as problematic itself as the use of the language distorted by the catalytic presence of aesthetic elements. The final product of such a process cannot be considered as true art. It could be labeled either bad philosophy, if it is beyond comprehension, or philosophy *per se* if it is sufficient in meeting all requirements of philosophical writing. In that respect, I agree with those who contend that a philosopher should not and will not need to claim art for his or her own, at least as far as conveying philosophical truths¹³. Art can never assume the role of philosophy since it cannot provide rational argumentation and evidence, even if it can present truths through the use of human language. In the latter case, if it proceeds to supply its newly found propositions with argumentation analysis, it will no longer be art, as long as it is detached from its aesthetic properties, but a medium of philosophy. That being said, it is wrong to infer that art lacks a philosophical dimension. It is my contention that such a dimension lies in art's capacity to activate the viewer, who might even be a philosopher, into a philosophical inquiry. It is the aesthetic power of an artwork, coupled with insightful conceptual ideas,

13. J. EILEEN, Reading Fiction and Conceptual Knowledge: Philosophical Thought in Literary Context, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 56, 1998, p. 345. Cf. also P. LAMARQUE and S. OLSEN, *op. cit.*, p. 368.

which activates the contemplation process and sparks off a further debate; that constitutes the philosophical site of art.

On the other hand, a philosophical work can be made to look like a work of art or adopt some artistic or literary qualities. But the issue is what the initial purpose of it was. Was it meant to be philosophy or art and so destined to fit other criteria? Plato's *Phaedo*, for instance, despite its aesthetic value, is nothing but a great philosophical treatise on soul. Written in the form of dialogue, it is a flashback to the day of Socrates' execution. *Phaedo*, at a later date, narrates the conversation that took place around Socrates' death bed. Set against the dramatic backdrop of death row, it does generate emotions and stirs up feelings even though that comes secondary to the philosophical inquiry. Although it closely resembles a drama, with its narrative pace, dialogue, and character delineation, the work does not deviate from its main purpose which is the exploration of immortality by means of the *maieutic* method. That is why the argumentative conversation is prominent and the literary elements are kept to a minimum. There are parts of dialogue where a character engages in a long speech that bears resemblance to an extended monologue, a fact demonstrating that the true purpose of the philosopher was to write philosophy not to make art. Although the dialogue contains obvious dramatic elements and in all possibility several fictional characters, it is far from being fiction or drama. Plato's dialogues, contrary to dramatic poetry, do not aim at stirring up emotions but at exploring moral, metaphysical, political and epistemological issues. Dramatists frequently present moral issues and prompt the audience to think about them, but they do not support them with an argumentative language. Drama is pure art. Plato's dialogues –pure philosophy– are emotionally dry or at least, as in the case of *Phaedo*, stay too close to the austere style of philosophical writing, narrating emotional events, like the death of the philosopher, without resorting to literary devices or melodramatic tones. Socrates' composure facing his own death and the almost unemotional way he sends his family away in the closing part of the dialogue, despite the emotional reaction of his friends, underline Plato's purpose. It seems as if, besides making a point on bravery when facing death, the philosopher is exhorting the reader not to be emotionally attached. Even though the complete emotional alienation of the reader is not possible, emotions function independently of the main body of the dialogue that is a philosophical conversation with solid arguments provided.

In conclusion, even if a philosophical work possesses artistic elements, it is nothing but philosophy written primarily in plain language. On the contrary, in the case of an art medium, such as drama, literature or film, that cherishes a philosophical language, the omnipresent aesthetic elements define the final effect; it was meant to be art and the final result is art. The *Death of Empedocles*, a film by Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub, is full of philosophical overtones and, in their simplicity, profound dialogues. In addition, the directorial style, with minimum camera movements, still shots,

an almost impasse in cinematic rhythm and less importance to cinematic contextual elements, all aim at distancing the viewers so as to discourage empathic attachment, encourage critical judgment and eventually put forward the conceptual content. However, the overall *mise-en-scène* cannot but stimulate feelings and create an emotional experience associated only with exposure to art. Because even a still shot that depicts a fictional world inside a frame –its visual architecture and all pictorial elements intact– cannot but appeal to the senses. It was meant to be art and so it is.

III

I have argued so far that art cannot be a conveyor of original truths independently of philosophy. It can only present antecedently possessed knowledge and activate a further inquiry which exceeds art's own limits, though. The ultimate question is whether art can access new knowledge in a non-propositional way that is beyond justified true belief.

It is certain that art requires the viewer's active participation in accessing concepts and ideas, moral beliefs and claims, which an artist-philosopher aspires to communicate. We have to think, the *intellect* being the determining factor, in order to interpret, contemplate and understand the meaning of an artistic message. This learning process is, as I have mentioned, immediately dependent on our life experiences, preconceived perceptions, ideology and use of reason. I use the term *artist-philosopher* to signify a necessary condition: the artist has to have a philosophical inclination and the appropriate genius in order to venture a course that matches his or her aspirations. Artists with such a penchant, even if they are aware they cannot legitimately argue for a moral claim without leaving art and engaging philosophy, can, nevertheless, attempt to get their beliefs across using either human language, as in the case of literature, drama or poetry, or, and in addition to visual imagery, as in the case of visual arts. But the most crucial factor in such a venture is the utilisation of aesthetic elements so that the condition of «art *qua* art» is satisfied. The focus should be on visual imagery, since imagery, together or independently of language, has narrative capacity and, thus, can convey conceptual thoughts. The point is that art functions in that respect through the activation of imaginative thinking. Considering that the creator of an artwork cannot effectively communicate propositional concepts through the use of aesthetic language, unless the viewer had an extra sense or other thought receptors to decipher such a language, then the imagination factor is paramount. Imagination is involved in the process of interpreting artistic messages and in the subsequent exploration of imaginative or perceived concepts that are generated or insinuated in an artwork. The visual or literary imagery sets imagination in motion. Since there can be more to an artwork than an image depicts, the viewers might be invited, depending on their capabilities

and art's own potentials, to expound on a hint and construct a sequence of concepts or conceptual realms beyond a particular artistic proposal. That might be the end of art and the beginning of cognitive inquiry; the dawn of the philosophical contemplation which, as I have argued, follows the viewer's activation. Hence, it seems that imagination holds a pivotal role in both the artistic interpretation and the learning process.

Consider, for example, Buñuel's film *The Exterminating Angel*, that brilliant social parable about the guests of an upper-class dinner party, who inexplicably are unable to cross the threshold of the music room, trapped, psychologically but not physically, inside it. Someone might think, interpreting the film's vision, that the bourgeoisie obsessed with vanity cannot cross the boundaries of their own world, namely political, ideological, social, religious or aesthetic boundaries. The story can also be interpreted, depending on a viewer's political perspective, as an allegory for the social elite's incapacity to change, a fact that will cause their self-destruction. The film does not convey explicitly such a belief through the use of propositional language. Not such concept is articulated in dialogue or in the off screen narration. Only the power of the image, with the inspired symbolism and the action depicted in it, can impel the audience to imagine and think about the truths the filmmaker aspires to present. Films, as well as poetry, are imbued with the power to create cinematic or literary images and that is a major factor in activating imaginative thinking. But how could an image itself, which constitutes the quintessence of art, support a truth with arguments? If it could, then what would be the accuracy of such an argumentation? Buñuel, like every other artist, does not provide evidence and does not support his beliefs in an argumentative way. His film, through action and imagery, can only express opinions and some truisms but not truths. It can make statements about bourgeois incarcerated in their own world, but without providing legitimate justification. However, the audience using their own imagination can expound on the theme and by employing their cognitive powers can explore social, religious, political and psychological issues pertaining to the film's premise in a process of moving from the particulars to the universals. An artistic experience engages the imagination that remains active afterwards as the viewer contemplates on the artistic premise. Thus, imagination becomes the connective element between art and philosophical inquiry. That is because imagination is also involved in philosophical thinking. As Gordon Graham has pointed out «Intellectual inquiry too employs imagination, in forming hypotheses, rooting out the facts in the first place and interpreting them»¹⁴.

The process above is nevertheless a fusion of artistic and intellectual experience which can lead to philosophical understanding. It is important to

14. G. GRAHAM, Learning from Art, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 35, 1995, p. 31.

point out that imaginative thinking is the basis for the imaginative understanding. Art, as Matthew Kieran underlines, can stimulate imaginative understanding of a particular situation and thus deepen our imaginative understanding of our own world. Reflecting upon certain situations and human conditions, we can identify with the characters depicted in an artwork and become more aware of their plights, moral values and commitments, which, in turn, may enhance our moral judgment. Thus imaginative understanding is essential for moral understanding¹⁵. It is imperative to stress out once again the importance of active participation on the viewer's part. The course of emotional awakening, imaginative thinking, and the ensuing cognitive inquiry, is a dynamic process during which the motivated viewer actively participates in contemplating and understanding truths already known.

The quintessential role of imagination marks a potential development: the viewer might be moving from contemplating known truths into accessing new ones in a different way. Perhaps art can communicate to us truths beyond our direct apprehension and speak about things outside consciousness. Such truths can be approached by intuition and feeling. It is the Romantics' view that knowledge can be obtained in another way, non-propositional, and therefore beyond «justified true belief». The notion of *transcendence* is prevalent in their theory of the relationship between art and knowledge. Romantics called attention to the emotional, the visionary, the subjective, the imaginative and the transcendent. Imagination is the vehicle for transcending our experiences beyond the physical world into the realms of the spiritual and the supernatural. In that sense, imagination can lead not to propositional knowledge but to transcendent experience and truths. In that context, if art can initiate the emotional and imaginative process I described previously, then by exposing ourselves to an inspirational artwork we can attain knowledge not only rationally or empirically but in a transcendent way. If that is plausible, then, although art cannot access truths in the same way as philosophy, it can nonetheless open a door to a new perspective: knowledge can be the result of a transcendent experience. In such a hypothesis, since the way of accessing knowledge is not propositional, truths can be conveyed without the support of evidence and the necessary argumentation. In that case, truths can not only be pre-existing but all new and accepted as truths, since they do not require justification. Arts, perhaps, can inspire us to look at ourselves, at others and the world from a different perspective, as well as to gain a different access to truth and learn about things we do not know. Wittgenstein said that philosophy cannot speak about all things: «There are, indeed, things

15. M. KIERAN, Art, Imagination, and the Cultivation of Morals, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 54, 1996, pp. 343-349.

that cannot be put into words. They make themselves manifest. They are what is mystical»¹⁶. There are truths that lie outside the world; aesthetic, spiritual and ethical truths that constitute the ineffable: «It is clear that ethics cannot be expressed. Ethics is transcendental»¹⁷. Can art speak about those otherwise inexpressible things? Can an inspirational artistic experience create an opportunity for man to search for the unknown? Can the artist-philosopher seize what the human speech is incapable of saying and transform it into an experience? There are some artists conscious of this potential and even talk about it, while attempting to transform the mystical and the irrational into an artistic experience. Magritte writes:

«The mind loves the unknown. It loves images whose meaning is unknown, since the meaning of the mind itself is unknown. The mind doesn't understand its *raison d'être*, and without understanding that (or why it knows what it knows), the problems it poses have no *raison d'être* either»¹⁸.

As Suzan Gablik states: «For Magritte, painting was a means of evoking a meta-reality which would transcend our knowledge of the phenomenal world. He referred to it continually as “the mystery”, about which it is impossible to speak, since one can only be seized by it»¹⁹. Sometimes great artists have yearned for the seemingly impossible and almost touched it. Think, for instance, of Andrei Tarkovsky's mastery. That great filmmaker achieved something that few artists had ever envisioned. Through his visionary, poetic and sometimes «out of this world» haunting but undoubtedly natural and unpretentious images, he succeeds in transforming our world into something not yet conceivable: a microcosmos of our inner, spiritual self. Furthermore, the moral themes which are omnipresent in his films, such as love, alienation, forgiveness and sacrifice, as well as the quest for knowledge and spirituality, are all clear and well supported not by philosophical reasoning but by the presence of true beliefs already possessed by us, moral beliefs well rooted in humanity. Tarkovsky's films are inner journeys to our consciousness and, at the same time, they reach for the universal and the ultramundane. In *Solaris*, Kris's mission to the planet is virtually a trip to his consciousness, to human consciousness. The moment he returns to Earth and embraces his father's knees –an imaginative reconciliation– signifies a journey of spiritual transformation. In that final moment, as the camera

16. L. WITTGENSTEIN, *Tractatus*, 6.522.

17. *Ibid.*, 6.421.

18. S. GABLIK, *Magritte*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1985, p. 12.

19. *Ibid.*

moves away and up, as our perspective widens, the Earth –or rather Kris’s house on a piece of land– is seen as being nothing more than a microscopic part of the swiveling Solaris ocean. Our tiny world is encapsulated within the universe; our individual soul within the spiritual cosmos. The whole film, a stroke of genius, with a *mise-en-scène* out of space and time, creates a visual landscape of moral and spiritual values. Beyond the philosophical interpretation of the particular artwork that is, nevertheless, subjective, it is the dreamy imagery and the creative power of its visual language that transcends reality into an unknown but simultaneously familiar realm. Tarkovsky’s art, like the work of other great artists-philosophers, unlocks a little but perceivable opening to an infinite space of exploration; a world of ideas and values not yet attained by means of propositional knowledge. In Tarkovsky’s own words:

«Art could be used to be a symbol of the universe, being linked with the absolute spiritual truth which is hidden from us in our positivistic, pragmatic activities»²⁰.

But if art can attain the improbable and discover truths not yet known, how accurate this newly acquired knowledge can be? Considering the non-rational or empirical nature of such an inquiry, it is rather impossible to test it for its accuracy. However, human mind, with all its limitations but also unrevealed potentials, can expand its capabilities and reach new highs. Human evolution is still in progress and so is the development of our capacities. Perhaps as our intelligence advances, while art progresses and acquires new potentials, it can empower us to learn about ourselves, life and the world in completely new ways. In that sense and context, art can have a paramount role not only in transcending our mundane experience but also in supporting philosophy and science in search for new knowledge. But for now, our inquisitive mind will yearn for philosophy, while our thirsty soul for the riches of art in the realm of aesthetic experience.

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20. A. TARKOVSKY, *Sculpting in Time*, trans. K. Hunter-Blair, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1987, p. 37.

ΦΙΛΟΣΟΦΙΑ, ΤΕΧΝΗ ΚΑΙ Η ΑΠΟΚΤΗΣΗ ΓΝΩΣΗΣ

Περίληψη

Δεδομένης της αδυναμίας της τέχνης να εκφράσει προτασιακές κρίσεις, τίθεται το ερώτημα εάν ή τέχνη δύναται να διατυπώσει αλήθειες, όπως για παράδειγμα ήθικες ή φιλοσοφικές αλήθειες, με έναν μη προτασιακό λόγο. Μολονότι ή τέχνη δεν παρέχει τὰ κατάλληλα εργαλεία για τή διατύπωση λογικών επιχειρημάτων, εντούτοις δύναται να μᾶς παρακινήσει να επανεκτιμήσουμε τή γνώση πού ἤδη κατέχουμε καί να προκαλέσει μιὰ περαιτέρω γνωστική ἔρευνα. Ἡ ἴδια ἡ φύση τῆς τέχνης προϋποθέτει τήν καταλυτική παρουσία αἰσθητικῶν στοιχείων τὰ ὁποῖα περιορίζουν τή χρήση προτασιακοῦ λόγου σέ σημείο ὥστε ἕνα ἔργο τέχνης, ἀσχέτως τῆς ὁποίας φιλοσοφικῆς του διάστασης, νά θεωρεῖται μόνον τέχνη καί ὄχι φιλοσοφία. Ἐντούτοις, ὁ ρόλος τῆς τέχνης στήν ἀπόκτηση γνώσης μέσω τῆς παραγωγικῆς λειτουργίας τῆς φαντασίας καί πέραν τῆς ἄμεσης ἀντίληψης εἶναι ζωτικός· γνώση τήν ὁποία μπορούμε νά προσεγγίσουμε μέσω τοῦ ἐνστίκτου καί τοῦ συναισθήματος. Αὐτό σηματοδοτεῖ καί μιὰ πιθανή ἐξέλιξη στήν ἔρευνα γιά τὸ ἄγνωστο, τὸ ἄφατο ἐπέκεινα τῶν λογικά θεμελιωμένων πεποιθήσεών μας.

Βασιλική ΚΑΛΔΗ

