

FUNCTION AND EXPERIENCE: TOWARDS AN EXPERIENTIAL EVALUATIVE FUNCTIONALISM

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In this paper I offer both a critique and revision of the functional theory of artistic evaluation as forwarded by Noël Carroll and Jonathan Gilmore. In summary, this theory has it that works of art ought to be evaluated based upon their ability to fulfill some function specified by the artist responsible for their production. A potential consequence of this thesis is that the evaluation of a work of art could theoretically be performed without the evaluator having had any genuine experience of the work in question. Taking a cue from the work of both Richard Wollheim and Paisley Livingston, I try to show that this consequence breeds disaster for our commonsense conception of good art criticism: for our everyday concept of art criticism, a good art critic is one who adequately appreciates works of art, where such appreciation involves experiential contact with the works in question. Once this problem is sketched out, I provide a revised version of the functionalist framework that I believe avoids the problem of inexperienced criticism by centering the production of a unique artwork-relative experience as the primary function of a given work of art.

I. Wollheim on Artistic Understanding

I want to begin with an idea that can be found in Richard Wollheim's (1984, 252) article "Art, Interpretation, and the Creative Process," namely, the idea that "understanding a work of art is a perceptual activity". This thought has two central components: the first is that the viewer utilizes a relevant "cognitive stock" of information to enrich their viewing of a work; the second is that the relevant information allows the meaning of a work to become manifest in the viewer's experience of said work. According to Wollheim, genuine recovery of an artwork's meaning involves coming to experience the work and its qualities as the artist ultimately intended for it to be experienced. Contrary to any strict form of aesthetic cognitivism, for Wollheim the meaning of a work is not an object of pure cognition but that of *cognitively-informed* experience.

It is this quasi-cognitivist thesis that will guide what I have to say in the balance of this paper. For I believe that this reformulation of Wollheim's thought can be used to subtend a prominent theory of artistic evaluation: the functional theory of art criticism. In my eyes, this theory runs into trouble at exactly the point in which Wollheim's thesis seems most correct; a potential consequence of the functional theory as it has so far been articulated is that the evaluation of a work of art could theoretically be performed without the evaluator having had any genuine experience of the work in question. In section II below, I'll do my best to make explicit both the tenets of evaluative functionalism and the mentioned issue with it. Section III will comprise my proffered amendment to the standard functional theory aimed at addressing this issue. In short, this will take the form of a revised evaluative functionalism that centers the production of a unique artwork-relative experience as the primary function of a work of art. Section IV will serve as a brief conclusion.

II. Evaluative Functionalism and the Concept of Criticism

The Functional Theory in Outline

Broadly construed, the functional theory of evaluation as proffered by Jonathan Gilmore (2011) and Noël Carroll (2022), amongst others, is nothing more than a reminder that artworks—like all other man-made objects—are artefacts.¹ In being produced as artefacts, all works of art are produced to serve a certain (intentionally defined) purpose, and therefore may be evaluated in terms of their ability to serve the purpose for which they were originally produced. This broad construal may be clarified a bit through comparison with the functional evaluation of a more commonplace artefact.

When one begins the task of critically evaluating a knife, the primary consideration is neither the length of the blade nor the thickness of its handle, but the knife's ability to easily cut through objects. The length of the blade and the thickness of the handle may ultimately come to be of some importance insofar as they aid in the knife's ability to cut through things with ease, but it's clear that the importance of these features is only arrived at derivatively through prior consideration of the knife's cutting abilities. In short, a knife, qua knife, is made with a specific function in mind, so any evaluation of a knife must first and foremost privilege its ability to perform this function. The same goes for any other man-made item. In evaluating them, we first look to see the function(s) for which they were produced, and then go on to judge how well they can fulfill this function.

1 I've chosen to focus on Gilmore and Carroll's work as both put forward intentionalist theories of evaluative functionalism, and I believe the intentionalist version of this theory to be the most fruitful variety of functionalism on offer. For functional theories that do not explicitly adhere to an intentionalist thesis, see Kaufman (2002) and Parsons and Carlson (2008). Parsons and Carlson (2008, 215) specifically veer far from intentionalism in that they attempt to identify a work's "proper function" with whatever mechanisms "explain the continued existence, maintenance, or preservation" of said work. The criticisms developed in this paper will only focus on intentionalist versions of the functional theory.

Whereas normal artefacts tend to have a single function that's definitive of their nature, there's a clear discrepancy between such commonplace items, such as a knife, and works of art. That is, there does not seem to be any one function which both Bach's *Goldberg Variations* and Fassbinder's *In a Year of 13 Moons* seek to fulfill. Functional theorists however are not blind to this disanalogy. In his "A Functional View of Artistic Evaluation," Gilmore (2011, 295-6) addresses this by introducing the thought that the generic functions of artworks are able to do the work that general definitional functions do for all other artefacts.² Although all artworks do not share a unified function, each artwork does belong to specific genres, and these genres themselves can be functionally defined. For example, *In a Year of 13 Moons* can be categorized as a work of both New German Cinema and early Queer Cinema, and we can determine how good or bad the work is at fulfilling the functions definitive of each of these genres. As a work of New German Cinema, we can look to see how well the film was able to accomplish the goal of helping to carve a new cinematic identity for a fragmented, economically fraught and culturally disillusioned post-war Germany. And as a work of Queer Cinema, we can consider how well the film showcases the vicissitudes of queer life through its focus on the suffering of a transgender woman dealing with the personal and public consequences of her transition. In any case, the deferral to generic functions provides a genre-based standard from which we can base our functional evaluations of the film or any other work of art.

This focus on generic evaluation should not however be taken to preclude the fact that for the artist the use of generic conventions only figures in the creative process as a means to the achievement of some greater end envisioned for the piece. This greater end is what functional

2 For a similar intentionalist theory of the genre-based or "categorical" functions that an artwork may possess, see Abell (2015). Abell (2015, 32) goes further than Gilmore in that she attempts to not only associate certain functions with certain genres, but also to define each genre by the function(s) they assign to works falling under them.

theorists call the work's *constitutive function(s)* or *purpose(s)*. In Carroll's (2022, 8) words, these functions "provide the unifying ideas that endow the artwork's parts and elements with relevance and significance," and, as such, it is to this function that all criticism must finally appeal, for their identification allows us to determine whether a work and its component parts succeed in the role envisioned for them by the artist. Thus, according to the functional theory, when we evaluate a work of art, we determine which function(s) the artist had in mind for it, and in determining this, we can come to know what genre(s) the artist intended the work to fall under (or to subvert).³ Once we know these functions, we then move to settle the question of whether or not they have been satisfied by the work. On this picture, then, artistic evaluation is just a matter of seeing whether an artwork is able to do all that it was, artistically speaking, intended to do.

Harking back to *In a Year of 13 Moons*, a candidate constitutive function for the film might then be: to expose the unacknowledged indecency of the post-war German social structure through a graphic exhibition of the physical and psychological toll paid by a transgender woman living in such a social sphere. This constitutive function makes subtle reference to both of the generic functions mentioned earlier, and due to the nesting of these functions within the work's larger constitutive function, satisfaction of the latter relies upon satisfaction of the former. So, for the evaluative functionalist, the extent to which one deems *In a Year of 13 Moons* a good film—a film satisfying its constitutive function—is the extent to which one deems it a good work of both New German and

3 This description of the identification process is not quite right. More commonly, this process will involve one reflectively coming to identify both the constitutive and generic function(s) in tandem, balancing out one's thoughts about one with those about the other(s). See Carroll (2016, 5-8) for more on the complex and often piecemeal nature of function identification. Additionally, works may have functions beyond just their constitutive and generic functions—e.g., the work might possess decidedly political or moral functions. For a view that gives functions focusing on the moral, political, and more broadly "cultural interests of a civilization" a more foundational role in the functional profile of an artwork, see Kaufman (2002, 157-8).

Queer Cinema.

Inexperienced Criticism and Critical Testimony

Though I believe that evaluative functionalism is largely correct, there is one problem with the view as it has been described: on certain readings, it appears as though the whole of the functional evaluative process could be performed without any actual experience of the work in question. All that is required for evaluation of a work and its constituents is an understanding of its functions and a determination of the degree to which they are satisfied. And in theory, this determination can be made with nothing more than the functional understanding listed above, a thorough description of the perceptible qualities of the work, and a limited range of background contextual information. The issue with this existing as even a theoretical possibility is that it fails to mesh with our general model of art criticism: a typical patron of the arts would not be willing to accept the critical testimony of a critic who lacks any real experience of the work itself.⁴

To those that do not share this intuition, I'd like to submit the following thought. Incredible as it may be, we might suppose that there is some individual out there who is gifted with the inexplicable ability to descriptively know all of a work's properties, functions, and relevant

4 In what follows, I'll be taking an optimistic approach to the question of aesthetic testimony. My reason for optimism has to do with the commonplace treatment of critical testimony as a source of knowledge within the artworld: we generally find it acceptable to defer to the opinions of our informed friends or of working critics on aesthetic matters. For similar thoughts, see Gorodeisky (2010, 60) and Hopkins (2011, 153). That being said, there is nothing in the functionalist position itself that mandates an optimistic stance towards aesthetic testimony. Just as I stated that my comments in this paper will only be addressed to intentionalist varieties of functionalism, they equally shall only apply to such a position in conjunction with generalized testimonial optimism. There is ample room in conceptual space for a functionalist view in which one is a pessimist about aesthetic testimony while remaining staunchly intentionalist. Alternatively, one might be an evaluative functionalist, an aesthetic optimist, and an intentionalist. And finally, one could hold a functionalist position while rejecting both intentionalism and aesthetic testimony. The issue voiced in the main text and the experiential solution I offer in response will only be an issue for the first of these four positions.

contextual background immediately after hearing about said work. What I'm hypothesizing is that this individual, upon learning of the existence of the work, clairvoyantly gains access to all the information needed for a functional evaluation of the work without having any experience of the work itself. We can also imagine that this individual's critical acumen matches that of our highest critical authorities. I'd now like to pose, in the form of a question, the intuition introduced earlier in this section: without appeal to the judgements of any other critical authority, *can* an audience member confidently defer to the opinions of this inexperienced critic?

My intuition is that the average connoisseur of the arts would regard the miraculous powers of this as little more than a party trick. The problem does not have so much to do with the metaphysics of critical evaluation as it does with the norms of critical testimony. It's not as though there is anything wrong with the critic's opinions themselves; for all intents and purposes they will be veridical functional evaluations. So epistemically speaking our inexperienced critic does seem to be an apt source of critical knowledge, and by taking part in testimonial exchanges with such a critic, we should be able to ourselves gain evaluative knowledge about artworks. The difficulty here is that the arbiter of these opinions does not measure up to our normal assumptions about good sources of critical knowledge. The inexperienced critic may possess the correct opinions on all matters having to do with artistic evaluation, but since this opinion lacks any experiential support, as audience members, we are incapable of seeing this critic as a real source of knowledge about the work even if they in fact are. The point is not that all critical evaluation of artworks requires firsthand experience of said work—this is clearly the case with conceptual art and some works of performance art, though an appropriate experience of these works might be best conceived along contemplative rather than sensory lines—but that our everyday concept of the place of critical testimony to in our artworld practices has it that somewhere along the line the source of an evalu-

ative opinion had some experience produced by the work in question. This has little to do with the epistemology of testimonial exchanges and everything to do with the norms surrounding our concept of art criticism.

My reasoning here comes close to that of Richard Wollheim's (1980, 233) famous acquaintance principle according to which "judgements of aesthetic value, unlike judgements of moral knowledge, must be based on first-hand experience of their objects and are not, except within very narrow limits, transmissible from one person to another". However, unlike Wollheim, I not only believe in the possibility of commonplace art-critical testimony but think that such testimonial practices are partially definitive of the role carved out for art critics in the artworld as a whole. While I don't want to say that artistic evaluation requires first-hand experience in all cases, there is something to the idea that experience is central to what we think of as the role of a critic and their reliability as sources of testimony regarding the inherent value of a work of art.

My thought then is the following: the issue with the inexperienced critic is that we cannot deem them reliable according to our standard conception of the reliability of an artistic pundit. For our everyday concept of a reliable art critic is someone who has, if nothing else, *adequately appreciated* the artistic value of whatever work they are criticizing, and in virtue of having thus appreciated the work's value can tell the rest of us how to do so. And following Paisley Livingston (2003, 277), I'd like to say that a subject S "aesthetically gauges or appreciates the inherent aesthetic value of some item only if S has an aesthetic experience of that item, where such experience requires S's direct contemplation of either

the item or some adequate surrogate for it”.⁵ In contrast to this, the inexperienced critic certainly cannot be said to have adequately appreciated the value of the work, as they’ve had no experiences produced by the work in question. The criticism received from this critic is much like that which might be received from a “criticism machine” into which one inserts details about the functions of a work, its surface level perceptible qualities, and a limited range of background contextual information, and from which one receives a functional evaluation. Even though their evaluations may be correct all things considered, and even though they might continuously give us such correct evaluations, without having genuinely appreciated whatever artistic value the work has to offer, they just don’t fit the bill of what we take a certified art critic to be. And thus, we can’t allow ourselves to treat them as sources of testimonial knowledge.

So, then, the function theory must either deny that our common understanding of an art criticism has it that critics are avid appreciators of the value of artworks or it must place some experiential requirement on the structure of good critical evaluation so as to ensure that critical testimony does ultimately come from only such appreciators. Because I find it beneficial to any theory of artistic evaluation that it be able to preserve our ordinary understanding of art critical practices, I’ll be addressing the second horn of this dilemma. As one might imagine, this will involve incorporating the Wollheimian thesis described above into the theory of evaluative functionalism.

5 Livingston includes the clause concerning “an adequate surrogate” for the work to allow for cases in which photographs, recordings, or models of works serve as the basis for our appreciation of the works’ values. I am largely in agreement with Livingston that such surrogates could serve as the basis for a subject’s experiential appreciation of the value of a work. For spatial reasons, I will not here discuss what I take to be an adequate surrogate for a work.

III. A Revised Functionalism

Recall that Wollheim's thought was that understanding the meaning of a work of art is equivalent to experiencing the work of art as the artist themselves intended the work to be experienced. This quasi-cognitivist denial of purely propositional artistic contents may be seen to clash with the strict cognitivism of the functional theory, as functionalism makes evaluation a matter of determining whether or not a work of art meets the functional standards which it sets itself. In each case, these standards are defined by the constitutive and generic functions, both of which are putatively propositional in character. There is, thus, no apparent space in the functionally defined evaluative exercise into which the experiential focus of the Wollheimian thesis can fit.

Against this, I hold that the experiential focus of Wollheim's thesis not only can fit into the functional theory, but must if the theory is to ward off the issues broached in section III above. In the previous paragraph, I noted that the nature of a work's constitutive and generic functions is only *putatively* propositional in character, but I did not say that a propositional format was necessitated by any aspect of the theory: one could conceive of a functional theory that takes its functions to be specified non-propositionally, and this reinterpretation of functional content would immediately bridge the gap between the quasi-cognitivism of Wollheim's thesis and the strict cognitivism of the simple functional theory. On this reinterpretation, the content of a given work's constitutive function would be the production of whatever particular experience the artist intended the work to produce in a viewer with an appropriate cognitive stock, where such an experience falls on a continuum between being more strictly aesthetic (as in the case of the decorative arts) or largely contemplative (as one would expect of conceptual art). The work therefore succeeds insofar as it is able to produce, in the appropriately informed viewer, the intended experience.

One might wonder how the artist could form an intention about an

experience, as the content of intentions are usually taken to be wholly propositional, but this worry can be overcome if we imagine the experience to be identified demonstrably by the artist in the process of intention formation. A representative constitutive function will then be something like: "I want the work to produce *this* experience in the viewer," where *this* is used to demonstratively refer to an experience had by the artist themselves. What my account then holds is that critical evaluation of an artwork involves utilizing contextual knowledge one possesses about an artist, their life, and their oeuvre to try to determine the contours of the experience which the work functions to produce. This comprises a recreative effort in which the one's understanding of the artist's experience-productive purposes with a work are constrained by what is imagined to be the artist's actual experience at the culmination of the creative process. Once this is determined one moves on to consider whether one's felt experience actually corresponds to that which one imagined was originally intended.⁶ Thus, a work succeeds if it is able to produce in us the experience that we believe the artist intended it to produce, otherwise, it fails. This reinterpretation of functional content allows the theory to skirt by the potential threats posed to our concept of good criticism by the traditional functional theory, as critics would now only be able to evaluate an artwork if they've had an experience of it or a suitable surrogate. So, on this theory, good criticism can only ever come from one who has been in a position to adequately appreciate the work being criticized.⁷

6 Thus, the variety of intentionalism that undergirds the experiential functionalist thesis on offer here will be a moderate rather than an extreme form of actual intentionalism. For more on the difference between the various strands of actual intentionalism, see Iseminger (1996) and Carroll (2000).

7 Because my experience may ultimately differ from that of the critic, I can only say that I've learned from the critic that the work satisfied its function for them. We can avoid the charge of evaluative relativism on this point by supposing that the critic—rather than the average audience member—is the cognitively prepared viewer that the artist had in mind when crafting the work.

Applying this account to *In a Year of 13 Moons*, we can suppose that its constitutive function is the production of a unique empathetic experience of a transgender woman's suffering that helps reveal the unacknowledged indecency of the post-war German social structure. We must equally suppose that Fassbinder himself had this experience upon viewing the final cut of the film, and that it was this experience which signaled to Fassbinder that the film had reached completion. From the evaluative perspective, we as audience members use what we know about Fassbinder and his body of work to conceive of the potential experience he could have intended for the film to induce. If we think *In a Year of 13 Moons* succeeds at producing this experience, then we evaluate the film as good; if the film does not live up to the experiential standard, we think of it as failing to satisfy its purpose—and, therefore, as being a bad film.

IV. Conclusion

Throughout this paper, I've attempted to remedy a perceived failure of the functional theory of artistic evaluation that surrounded the theory's tolerance for instances of inexperienced criticism. I've tried to address these issues by reinterpreting the constitutive functions at the heart of the theory in broadly experiential terms. The resulting quasi-cognitivist functionalism has it that artistic evaluation is a matter of determining whether an artwork is able to produce whatever experience the artist intended it to produce. I believe that this experiential functionalism does better than the original in avoiding the problematic case of inexperienced criticism, while retaining much of its initial appeal. The intuition that has guided me throughout this paper was the Wollhemian thought that artistic understanding is a matter of correct experience of a work of art. Under its influence, I found myself unable to ignore the unsettling consequences of evaluative functionalism's insensitivity to the importance of experience for our critical relationship to artworks. Art criticism is an activity that relies for its very nature on experiential

engagement with art, and if the arguments in this paper have shown anything, it's that this truth is one which philosophers of art cannot afford to forget.

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