Art and Truth: ‘Good art should illuminate our experience or reveal ‘truths’’

This handout follows the handout on ‘art and representation’. You should read that handout first. The numbered artworks referred to in this handout are listed, with links, on the companion website.

**THE ARTIST’S VISION**

Even if the value of art does not depend on representing reality accurately, we might say that art is in some way about reality if it conveys some kind of ‘knowledge’ or ‘truth’. For example, 29. Picasso’s *Guernica* (1937) shows us the horror and awfulness of war. This is the ‘message’ that people come away with.

Or again, consider 24. Grünewald’s *The Crucifixion*. The crucifixion of Christ has a huge symbolic meaning in the Christian understanding of God, human life and our place in the universe. Grünewald is not simply evoking sorrow and anguish, but a religious message as well. What an artwork informs us of, then, is a vision of the world.

This view does not understand the ‘truth’ in art as a matter of accurate representation. The artist is not seeking to replicate or resemble what we perceive. When they use representation, they use it to express a deeper sense of reality, something that tell us not (or not merely) what we can see but what we experience in a fuller sense. Artists use representation to convey their vision.

This view protects several important distinctions. First, it allows us to distinguish between what a work represents explicitly and what it expresses. Second, it also explains the difference between valuing what is represented (which may be very unpleasant) and valuing the artwork as a representation of it. Third, we can distinguish between the value of an original artwork and that of a forgery. A forgery does not express the forger’s vision; it is not made as an expression of an insight or a truth that the artist searches for and works out in the making of the work. What the forgery will look like (if it is good) is fixed from the outset.

That art expresses a vision is also shown by our criticism of art that has ‘lost touch’. The work of an artist can lose its force over time if they fall into certain habits; their vision is no longer ‘fresh’ and what they express seems dull or facile. Or again, a work may try to capture and express an important event, but we say that it fails because it is not ‘true to’ the real significance of what happened; the artist’s vision is faulty.

**WHAT COULD WE MEAN BY ‘TRUTH’ IN ART?**

What do we mean of the artist’s vision, and what does it inform us of? We can start by thinking about idealization. 30. Palma Vecchio’s *A Blonde Woman* (c. 1520) is not a portrait of any particular woman, but an expression of the ideal woman, or the ideal of ‘woman’ – as Palma Vecchio imagines it. Many Renaissance artists consciously sought to
Plato thought the Forms are ultimate reality, and knowledge of the Forms knowledge of the deepest truths. To ‘copy’ or express them would therefore express truth. Even if we don’t accept Plato’s idea of the Forms, the model of idealization helps us understand one way in which art might express a truth. That this is ideal is an expression of human judgment. So understanding something as an expression of an ideal contributes to self-understanding. Or again, an ideal may illuminate our experience, e.g. by operating as a standard against which we measure experience.

A different way art may express ‘truth’ is through the attention it pays to the ordinary. ‘Look’, a painting can say; look at how individual, how unique objects that we take for granted really are. This intensity of vision is found in Van Gogh’s work, such as 31. Van Gogh’s Chair (1888). The artist sees what we overlook in everyday life, and expresses the truth that everything is precisely itself and nothing else, to be valued for its unique existence.

Novels can contribute to self-understanding and illuminate experience in other ways. A good novelist can portray the different points of view of different characters; the novel therefore may help us to understand how other people think and feel (as long as we don’t confuse real people with fictional characters!). The novelist may portray the experience of someone very different from us in a sympathetic light and so lead us to understand the world in a different light. They may also describe universal human experiences, such as getting older and the different views someone takes of their younger self over time; and so we may come to understand ourselves better.

**EVEN IF ART INFORMS US, IS THAT WHY WE VALUE IT AS ART?**

We can object that not all art expresses a vision or truth or even tries to. It is difficult to say of much music that it expresses a vision, rather than simply emotion. And there is art that is made simply to be enjoyed, and nothing more. Examples include pleasant, entertaining music and artefacts such as vases and rugs.

Second, focusing on how we are informed by art makes our appreciation of art too intellectual. We would always need to get the resemblance, the allusion, the message, the vision. In response, we can say that the vision of the artist is valuable not just for the ‘truth’ it reveals, but also for its expressive, emotional qualities.

Third, the idea of vision – particularly if we say that the vision develops as the artwork is created – does not always involve an understanding of how the world is already. We are therefore not learning something about the world independently of what is being expressed in the artwork. There is not always a message to take away into life more generally. In many cases, the vision is there just be to enjoyed and contemplated. ‘Information’, then, is the wrong model.

Finally, emphasising information also misses what is distinctive about art as art. A work of theology can express a religious view of the crucifixion. But it is not art and is not
valued as art. So it is the expressive qualities – both how the vision is expressed and the emotional qualities of the vision – that we value in art. The vision must move us, and it is being moved that is part of what we value.