

INTENTIONS AND EXPERIENCE

Why theorizing on art?

What is the aim of all that disciplines that produce theories about art and artworks?

Proposed answer: the ultimate aim of any theory of art is to provide tools able to enrich, in one way or another, our common relations with artworks.

If one accepts this general and pragmatic answer, the key question for any theoretician of art is: how contextual information can enrich our experience of an artwork?

This is not a trivial question, since not all information has this power. Sometimes we read one sentence in an article about an artwork and our experience of it is transformed. Sometimes we read an entire book about an artwork which leaves our experience unchanged. Sometimes an information that has an impact on the experience of a given spectator has no effect on the experience of another spectator.

To answer this question one needs a model of the psychological mechanisms underlying our experience of artworks.

I did not provide any conceptual argument for my model (this is the topic of a published book: Pignocchi, 2012). I just summed it up and then I tried to show that it allows producing tools able to enrich our experience of artworks.

Intentional Model:

- (1) Perceiving an artwork automatically and, in a great part, unconsciously, activates our mechanisms of intentions attribution.
- (2) The properties of artworks – lines of a drawing, strokes of a painting, sentences of a novel, camera movements and cuts of a movie – are perceived as the results of the intentions of an agent.
- (3) Artist's intentions: *all* the mental states – conscious or not – which have played a causal role during the production of the work (intuitions, emotions, mental images, sensations, unconscious aims, personality traits, motor intentions...).
- (4) For our cognitive system, an artwork is a window opened on an intentional process.

The intentional model proposes a first element of answer to the key question: contextual information can enrich the experience that a given spectator has of an artwork by enriching the intentional process that this spectator reconstructs during his experience of the work.

The key question thus became: how a contextual information can enrich the intentional process that a given spectator reconstructs during the experience of an artwork?

To answer, I have distinguished three families of psychological mechanisms of intentions attribution:

- (1) Attribution of functions to artifacts
- (2) Communication
- (3) Perception of others' actions.

Function of artifacts

In cognitive science there are now evidences showing that:

- (1) Function of an artifact = what it has been made for, what problems its creator intended to solve.

(Bloom & Markson, 1998; Boyer & Barrett, 2004; Greif Kemler et al., 2006; Gutheil et al., 2004; Kelemen & Carey, 2007; Preissler & Bloom, 2008).

- (2) Attributed function determined perception.

(Futó et al., 2010).

I have shown how these two claims allow to reframe the famous analyze that Baxandall has provided of *A Woman drinking tea* from Chardin in *Patterns of intention*, and help to understand the efficiency of this analyze.

The conclusion of this section is that the first way to enrich the experience of an artwork is to enrich the understanding of the functions of its properties (where 'function of a property' means: the problem that the artist intended to solve with this property).

Communication

A property of an artwork is received in a communicative mode when the spectator feels ostensibly addressed by the artist.

This section was based on the relevance theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1986) and on the development that Gergely and Csibra (2009) have provided to it.

I took the example of implicit communication in Hollywood cinema and notably in Hitchcock's *Psycho*.

As with any kind of communication, understanding a communicative act in an artwork rests on shared knowledge. So this is a second way through which a contextual information can enrich the experience of an artwork: by enriching the background knowledge which allows a spectator to derive rich implicit meanings from the communicative properties from the artwork.

Perception of others' actions.

Basing my claim on the theory of event coding (Hommel et al., 2001) I have shown that we perceive some properties of artworks as the result of actions that we could have produced (Pignocchi, 2010; see Freyd, (1983) for seminal work on this topic).

To enrich this mode of perception the most efficient way is to practice. Nevertheless, a contextual information can help to activate and organize the sensorimotor representations involved in this mode of perception, by helping the spectator to put himself in the shoes of the artist.

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