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**Important note:** This is a final draft and differs from the definitive version, which is published in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 63 (2005): 179-183. I have been assured by the University of Auckland's research office that if they have made this publicly available then it does not violate the publisher's copyright rules.

Beardsley and the Autonomy of the Work of Art

Beardsley's *Aesthetics* made a foundational contribution to the development of modern analytic philosophy of art. But is its interest and value now merely historical? Does it still have something to contribute, though the debate has moved on and the style, terminology, and tone of discussion have changed?

I

Beardsley's approach is striking for its stress on the independence of the work of art from its creator. This is apparent, for instance, in Beardsley's referring to artworks as "aesthetic objects" (pp. 44-6, 59-60). Because "aesthetic object" retains none of the afterglow of human warmth that lingers alongside "work of art", the terminology distances the artist from her work.

Beardsley's indifference to the work's artist is also apparent in the substance of the philosophical positions he develops. He is at pains to downplay the relevance for aesthetic appreciation of knowledge of the artist's intentions, experiences, or feelings, and to emphasize how the aesthetically relevant "regional properties" of the aesthetic object have an autonomous, objective status, as I now explain.

Beardsley believes (pp. 17-28; also see pp. 457-60) that if the intention is successful, the marks of this will be apparent already in the work, and if the artist failed in his intention, knowledge of the intention may be relevant to judging the artist but is not pertinent to discovering and assessing what is in the work. On either score, then, criticism can proceed

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1 *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* (New York: Harcourt and Brace and World, 1958). Subsequent page references are to this work.
without reference to the artist's intentions. External signs of the artist's intentions—as in diaries or pronouncements—may provide indirect confirmation for what is internally present in the work, but where the two conflict it is the external evidence that must be rejected.

In addition, Beardsley provides non-intentional accounts of features of works of art for which one would have expected artist's intentions to be crucial. For instance, his analysis of pictorial representation—a genus with depiction and portrayal as species—is non-intentional. He analyses depiction in terms of visual similarity between a pictorial design and members of a class of objects or events (pp. 271-2). Portrayal (pp. 273-8) is of particulars and comes in two kinds, physical and nominal. A picture is a physical portrayal of its sitter if it resembles that sitter. It is a nominal portrayal of a particular person or object if it has a title naming that individual and contains no features incompatible with that individual's depiction, either as they appear or, if they are fictional, as they are described. A given painting might be a depiction of a woman, a physical portrayal of its actual model, and, via its title, a nominal portrayal of Venus. In a similar vein, Beardsley regards symbolism in literature as generated through repetition and salience, not artists' intention (pp. 406-7). Also, a poem is ironic if competent critics find it so, even if irony was explicitly not intended by the poet (p. 26).

When he turns to musical expressiveness (pp. 326-39), Beardsley declares the composer's emotions irrelevant. Music's expressiveness depends on neither the composer's feelings nor the listener's affective response. Where it is joyous, music does not express anyone's joy, and while the dynamic pattern of music can be iconic with the form of affective processes and experiences, it does not symbolize or refer to these since it is neither a conventional nor a natural sign of the emotions. Musical expressiveness resides in regional qualities of the music itself. Though the characterization of these as joyful involves metaphor, such metaphors make an objective reference to musical features than can be described in technical terms.

As a general commitment, Beardsley suggests that "Genetic" reasons—ones referring to something existing before the work itself, to the manner in which it was produced, or its connection with antecedent objects and psychological states—are never good or sound for critical evaluations (pp. 457-8) because the work's aesthetic properties are unaffected by them. 'I propose to count as characteristics of an aesthetic object no characteristics of its presentations that depend upon knowledge of their causal conditions,
whether physical or psychological' (p. 52). The same applies to the aesthetic object's effects. Genetic or external factors do not affect the aesthetic object's internal properties, and criticism should be concerned only with what is internal to the work qua aesthetic object. 'Some [statements about aesthetic objects] are statements about the causes and effects of the aesthetic object; let us call these "external statements". The others are statements about the aesthetic object as such: its blueness, its "meaning", its beauty; let us call these "internal statements". From now on, I shall mean by "critical statement" an internal statement about an aesthetic object' (p.64).

II

How compatible are Beardsley's ideas with the current philosophical outlook? Within contemporary analytic philosophy of art, one view holds that the identity and content of artworks evolves through time, being affected by the interpretations the work receives. A more widely held position agrees that the artwork is "culturally emergent", but maintains that its identity is fixed at the time of its creation. According to this contextualist ontology, the identity and content of an artwork depends as much on the context in which it is created—especially on its art-historical and art-theoretical setting—as on the perceptible properties it presents to someone unaware of its origins. Two perceptually indistinguishable items might differ in that only one is an artwork, or in that they are distinct artworks and, in either case, they can display quite different sorts of artistically appreciable properties.

Beardsley would have no truck with the first position (see pp. 478-89 and pp. 515-6 for his criticism of relativism in interpretation and evaluation). He thinks the identity and aesthetic properties of the work are objectively established at its creation and are unaffected by its subsequent interpretation. It is the critic's proper job to discover what they are (p.462; see also pp. 20, 322-2). And the second, contextualist view appears to be uncongenial to Beardsley, given his rejection of "geneticism" and "intentionalism", along with the emphasis he places on the exclusive importance of "internal" properties.

If Beardsley's theory cannot be reconciled with the mainstream of contemporary analytic aesthetics, one might allow that it made its contribution to the progress of philosophical thought, but conclude that it has since been superseded. Or one could argue that things have gone badly
wrong and that Beardsley was on the right track after all. The remaining option maintains that Beardsley's position is not so tangential as was just implied to the current mainstream of analytic philosophy of art. In taking it, I argue that Beardsley's stance is consistent with contextualism and that the current view is not inevitably committed to intentionalism of the variety Beardsley rejects.

III

Beardsley did not assume there is an impervious barrier between what is internal and what external to the artwork. He allowed that our experience of what is internal to the work can be affected by knowledge of matters lying beyond the work's boundaries. 'Yet it is well known that our perceptions can be influenced by what we expect or hope to see … [The sculptor's] words may be able to make us see grace where we would otherwise not see it' (pp. 20). In this case the external influence distorts the experience of the work, but in others the appropriate aesthetic experience is available only to the person who understands matters integral to its production. 'Suppose you saw a massive bronze statue that impressed you with its power; you might find it harder to see that power if you learned that it was composed of painted cream puffs or carved out of a hunk of soap. It might actually look different' (pp. 51). In his discussion of literature (pp. 237-47) and representational painting (pp. 278-80), Beardsley makes clear that the reader or viewer must draw on her knowledge of the actual world.

The issue for Beardsley, then, is to distinguish among the external considerations that could affect the appreciation of an aesthetic object those that are appropriate from those that are not. 'Our capacity to respond richly and fully to aesthetic objects depends upon a large apperceptive mass. This may include some previous acquaintance with the general style of the work, or of other works to which it alludes, or of works with which it sharply contrasts. All this may be relevant information for the perceiver; what is not relevant is specifically information about the physical basis, the physical processes of creation, and the biographical background' (p. 53).

How are such passages to be squared with Beardsley's anti-genetic, anti-externalist pronouncements? For Beardsley, the only properties relevant to the appreciation of the aesthetic object are ones both objective (interpersonally accessible) and internal. But notice that "internal" properties can be complex, relational ones conditioned by or relative to factors beyond
the work's boundaries. So, when Beardsley dismisses the aesthetic significance of "external" properties, it needs to be remembered that his use of the term is stipulative (see p. 64). For him, "external" does not mean "beyond the work's boundaries", but, instead, "aesthetically irrelevant because neither an objective, internal property nor implicated in such properties". Understood this way, his anti-externalism is consistent with his allowing the relevance of knowledge of factors integral to the context of the work's creation and presentation, so long as these are responsible for giving the work its objective, internal shape and content.

Similarly, when one considers the genetic factors that Beardsley condemns as irrelevant to the work's aesthetic appreciation, these concern the artist's intentions, emotions, and sincerity, or matters simply of temporal order or ranking (see p. 457). Again, Beardsley denies that these affect the work's objective, internal properties. If the artist successfully expresses his emotion, say, it will be an objective, internal property of the work that it is expressive of the given emotion, but the work's expressive content depends on material, conventions, and practices within the artform, not on the artist's experience. By comparing what the artist felt with what the work expresses, we can learn whether the artist was successful or not in the attempt to communicate his emotions to the work, and this is relevant to our judgment of him, but it is not relevant to our assessment of the work as aesthetic object, for that concern is with what the work expresses rather than with what the author expressed by it.

Beardsley is inclined to treat intentions as similarly irrelevant to aesthetic appreciation. The work's meaning or content is sustained objectively by its non-aesthetic features, so knowledge of artists' intention is redundant if they succeeded and is irrelevant or misleading if they failed. Nevertheless, Beardsley makes at least one grudging but crucial concession to the intentionalist. He allows that the artist's choice of title can affect what his painting nominally portrays. When Veronese was called upon to alter his controversial representation of the last supper, he chose instead to change its title to Banquet in the House of Levi. Beardsley writes: 'I suppose that, in the absence of any further information about the decor and fauna in the vicinity of the Last Supper or Levi's banquet, we must admit that Veronese changed the portrayal-subject, though of course not the depiction-subject, when he changed the name' (p. 277). He qualifies his view: 'We inquire after the probable title of the picture … This is not exactly an appeal to the painter's intention, though it perhaps comes close to it; the question is not what the
painter intended to portray, but what he called his picture' (p. 275). Still, Beardsley cannot deny that the inquiry is about what the artist intended the title to be, and must therefore grant that artists' intentions play a decisive role in determining an aesthetically relevant and appreciable feature of their works; namely, what those works nominally portray.

It is arguable that some of the artist's intentions, assuming they are compatible with what she achieves, determine the identity of her work. The identity-relevant features of the work fixed in this way would include its category (tragedy, say) and its "basic" content (that is, its representational, expressive, or semantic topic). Accepting this is consistent with denying that artists' further intentions should constrain or control the interpretations those works receive. Anti-intentionalism as applied to the latter class of artists' intentions is not at odds with intentionalism as applied to the former class of artists' intentions. Beardsley's anti-intentionalism is directed primarily against those critics who do not hold the work's interpretation accountable to its content or, alternatively, who dismiss or reject unintended interpretations that are, nevertheless, supported by the work. So Beardsley should be able to swallow the idea that artists' titling intentions can determine what their pictures portray, even if it is like a fishbone to his throat, since doing so is consistent with the kind of anti-intentionalism on which he places most store.

Is Beardsley's anti-intentionalism compatible with the contextualism I have imputed to him? Some contextualists are also "actual" intentionalists as regards the interpretations that can be legitimately given to works of art.\(^2\) They think that, so long as the work's basic content is consistent with the interpretation intended for her work by the artist, that intention determines how the work should be interpreted. But other contextualists deny this and are anti-intentionalists when it comes to the interpretation of art. I have in mind the advocates of "hypothetical intentionalism".\(^3\) Hypothetical intentionalism is the view that the work means what an appropriate audience optimally supposes (on the basis of the work's content and the relevant aspects of the setting in which it was created) as the meaning intended by an author it hypothesizes.

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\(^2\) For example, Arthur C. Danto, Paisley Livingston, Gary Iseminger, Noël Carroll, and Daniel O. Nathan.

\(^3\) For example, William Tolhurst, Alexander Nehamas, Jenefer Robinson, Gregory Currie, and Jerrold Levinson.
Why did I just describe this view as anti-intentionalist, though its name proclaims it as a variety of intentionalism? According to the hypothetical intentionalist, the audience does not hypothesize about what might have been meant as a way of dealing with uncertainties about the actual artist's intentions. This is apparent in the case in which it is possible to come up with two opposed interpretations on the basis of attributing appropriate intentions to the hypothesized author, yet only one of these was intended by the actual author. Whereas an actual intentionalist regards the intended interpretation as automatically trumping its rival, the hypothetical intentionalist does not. If the unintended reading is aesthetically superior, the hypothetical intentionalist should favor it. The point of the audience's reasoning, according to the hypothetical intentionalist, is not to discover the actual author's intention but, instead, to come up with an aesthetically optimal account of the work.

The hypothetical intentionalist's account of literary interpretation is of a kind with which Beardsley could sympathize. It denies to (actual) authors' intentions the authority to limit the range of interpretations their works can receive. Instead, the acceptability of interpretations depends on the merits they reveal in the work, provided they are consistent with its basic contents. Moreover, it emphasizes the work above its producer as the proper target of aesthetic appreciation and evaluation. Beardsley's project, likewise, is to oppose interpretations that regard artworks as of interest only for what they reveal about the minds, attitudes, or emotions of their creators. And he does not differ from the hypothetical intentionalist in stressing that public conventions and practices, both of language and of art, are more relevant to the meaning of artworks than are artists' intentions conceived of as private acts of willing.

IV

Though they are presented in terms that are less likely to be used now, Beardsley's concerns and views are not alien to their present-day equivalents. Despite the uncompromising tone with which he defends the autonomy of the work from elements of the psychological and social setting from which it emerges, Beardsley is a contextualist of sorts, I have claimed. And though he may be an anti-intentionalist as regards the interpretation of artworks, so are many contemporary contextualists. His views differ from theirs more in degree than kind.
The focus has shifted in the past half century. Beardsley's philosophical heirs present their position not in contrast to views that value the maker above the product made, but, instead, that do not distinguish between what the work means and what, by using it as a springboard for free-association, the individual can get it to signify for herself. Their academic opponents, rather than advocating the hegemonic rule of artist's intentions, approaching interpretation as biography, and treating artworks as symptoms of their creator's psychology, are more likely to insist that the work is blank until interpreted, that the act of interpretation changes its identity, and that readers are the authors of the texts they interpret.

Beardsley was committed to "objective" aesthetics; that is, to the idea that the understanding of art must take the artwork as its focus, that a crucial part of the meaning and value of art is of interpersonal significance, and that interpretation, appreciation, and evaluation involve uncovering, exploring, and assessing properties inherent in the artwork. Many contemporary aestheticians share that commitment. And the program of objective aesthetics remain now as it was then, even if the agenda must be adapted to suit the opponent du jour. As long as objective aesthetics persists as a live philosophical option, Beardsley's concerns and arguments will be relevant.

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