

## Reflections On Whether a Person Can Understand the Art of Another Culture

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Typically, the dominant, colonizing culture acknowledges other cultures by appropriating what it wants from them and then relegating the remainder to the margins. So I can imagine the annoyance and frustration of a non-Westerner who has her culture West-splained<sup>1</sup> to her. And I understand that the offer of dialogue might be viewed with suspicion. But I think that a fruitful exchange about cross-cultural aesthetics is possible if we start with mutual respect and forbearance.

I am an Anglo-American analytic philosopher and write in the terms of my discipline, the style of which may seem abstract and detached. So let me explain where I'm coming from in trying to talk about the possibilities for cross-cultural aesthetics.

My first degrees were in musicology and ethnomusicology. (I got to philosophy via a deviant route!) As an ethnomusicologist, I've always had an interest in a broad spectrum of ethnic musics. (I prefer this term to "world music," which has taken on connotations of musical hybridization.) Many years ago, as a student in Australia, I played for a time in a central Javanese gamelan. Much later I became more focused on the very different culture, aesthetics, and arts of Bali. I have published scholarly articles on these topics, as well as on Balinese musicians' assessments of recorded performances and, in some detail, on the history and current status of the emblematic and unique legong dance genre.

In order to do this, I have watched hundreds of hours of live performances (for tourists, in temple ceremonies, at the annual arts festival, and commissioned). I studied the Indonesian language at university for three years. I interviewed leading Balinese musicians and dance teachers and read dozens of theses written by Balinese tertiary students of the arts. My collection of Balinese dvds, vcds, and cds numbers in the hundreds....

Do I appreciate Balinese music and dance? Better than many cultural tourists. But of course I would claim only a limited comprehension. Naturally, my knowledge and appreciation of the arts of my home culture are greater, but they too are very restricted and partial. In any culture, there is so much to learn!

My point is this: I have a first-hand appreciation of the challenges and rewards of trying (imperfectly and within limits) to appreciate the art of another culture. Writing about this is not for me a purely theoretical exercise. I am aware of just how difficult it can be to become informed about the history, form, technicalities, and practical demands of an initially unfamiliar foreign art genre. And I also know how pleasurable it can be to make some progress toward the kind of appreciation that it rewards if one finds that art form to be captivating and intriguing.

I am grateful to the symposiasts for thinking about my ideas. I take their articles in order.

Professor Samer Akkach is not a sympathetic critic of my views. He suggests that my perspective "predetermines what 'art' is, regardless of context, purpose, experience, and definition" (Akkach 2018). That is not what I intended. I want to put aside abstruse debates about art's definition in order to discover and build on those aspects that are common to our understandings of the notion. I do so with the aim of tracking what is shared and what is not between conceptions of art held in different cultures and, on that basis, of exploring the extent to which a person can attain an appropriate appreciation of art from outside her home culture, assuming she wants to.

Professor Akkach continues: "Westo-centric views, such as the one promoted by Davies [...] undermine effective cross-cultural engagements in three ways: in democratizing difference, in perpetuating Eurocentric conventional understanding, and in reducing otherness to predictable variables" (Akkach 2018).

Regarding the first we get: "difference is no longer about irreducible uniqueness, but, rather

ironically, about being the same” (Akkach 2018). I do not see this either as a goal or as a consequence of my views. I write: “we learn from non-Western art both what we share in common and what makes each culture different and unique. [...] Not only does it showcase our deep commonalities, it also highlights cultural eccentricity and dissimilarity” (Davies 2018a). Where is the reduction to sameness implied in this?

The second: “Concerning perpetuating Eurocentric conventional understanding, the emphasis on commonalities and the flattening of the topographies of difference tend to promote an essentialist position which, in our case here, sees ‘art’ as having been—in essence—always and everywhere the same” (Akkach 2018). In my paper I write no such thing and nothing I say entails or implies this. I think some elements and kinds of art are shared across cultures, as are some appreciative practices, but I also believe there are significant dissimilarities between the artworks and art forms of different cultures.

“Reducing otherness to predictable variables”—that is the third way in which cross-cultural understanding is said to be undermined by my Westo-centric view—involves assuming that “he/she knows well what the other has in mind, speaks on their behalf, and puts words into their mouth, so to speak” (Akkach 2018). But that seems to be exactly what Professor Akkach is doing to me! It is not a view expressed or defended in my paper.

In brief, Professor Akkach claims to identify what is wrong with Western ways of thinking in general. As my paper is an example of such thought, it must be wrong in the ways that all such thought is. A critique on these *a priori* grounds shows no interest in the particularities of my argument, in what I actually wrote, or in the issue I was trying to address. Had his approach been more open-minded, Professor Akkach might have found in my paper support for his positive view, which advocates the fusion of horizons in a fashion that is non-appropriating and accepting of difference.

Formalism has been widely held within Anglo-American philosophy of music. It maintains that music is an abstract sound-structure that should be approached without regard to the business of bodying it forth from musical instruments or to the nuances of sound that are characteristic of different instruments. I have argued against this view. Additionally, in trying to capture the phenomenology of the listener’s experience of musical expressiveness, I have described this as more like a direct encounter with a person who is feeling an emotion and vividly displaying it than it is like reading about such a person. Expressiveness is present in the music itself, not something to which the music refers or that it symbolizes.

Professor Meilin Chinn kindly identifies these observations as aligning my account of music with one presented in Chinese thought. And she suggests that such characteristics of music—and perhaps also of equivalents in the other arts—suit it to bridging the differences between cultures, thereby fostering friendship and, with it, mutual understanding. “Friendship is universal, yet I know my friend through caring for them according to their uniqueness, rather than as the ideal, neutral knower often lauded in epistemology and ethics. I understand my friend much as I understand a face or a piece of music, not merely as a form to be analyzed, but according to their ‘timbre’ and our mutual resonance” (Chinn 2018).

This idea harmonizes very nicely with the thoughts that motivated my paper for this symposium. Though I did not take up this issue, we can ask about the social consequences that might follow from a person undertaking the arduous task of appreciating the art of another culture. I stressed the direct benefits to her, in the form of knowledge. But this is not a task she can undertake alone. Hers is bound to be a shared enterprise with unique, embodied persons. And it involves the kind of sharing that leads to friendship and mutual respect. Learning from culturally different others about their art and why they care for it should prevent the reduction and simplification of those others and should promote friendship with them.

An excellent account of this process is presented by my friend Kathy Higgins—who is quoted and praised in Professor Powell’s contribution to the symposium (Higgins 2012).

Professor Enrico Fongaro provides an elegant summary of his conclusions: “Because humans speak and write differently, the understanding of art cannot but be ‘ambiguous’ in the Latin sense of the verb *ambigere* (amb-agere, ‘to lead around’), that is, exposed to an endless circular movement around its object without the possibility of defining it definitively. Furthermore, because humans have bodies, they can ‘understand’ art by letting themselves be bodily involved in the practice of an art, where its ‘definition’ is not captured by words, but by some gestures or movements that express it as an occurrence” (Fongaro 2018).

I do not doubt the difficulties of translating from one language to another or of conveying all the nuances of meaning that might be present. On this basis, it might be suggested that we can never fully understand the other’s meaning. We might even claim this for conversations conducted within a shared language. I regard these proposals as exaggerated, however. We do succeed in communicating fairly well, even in translation, and words in a given language do have shared, public meanings recorded in dictionaries, which would be impossible if attempts at communication led us in endless circles due to some irremovable ambiguity in language. Besides, Professor Fongaro here is discussing the possibility of defining art, of saying what it is, and that is a topic I explicitly avoided addressing in my paper. I have had plenty to say about that subject elsewhere.

Professor Fongaro takes up the issue of understanding art. He puts the words in scare quotes, as if my use of them is strange or provocative. So I welcome the opportunity to re-emphasize what I had in mind. By *understanding art* I mean *appreciating particular artworks according to the appropriate standards and conventions, these being the ones that practiced art appreciators of the artwork’s cultural home would use*. A person would have a well-developed understanding of an artwork from a culture that is foreign to her if she could identify the artwork, indicate its appreciable features, and explain what their appreciation involves and leads to, all in a way that would allow her to discuss these matters with a member of the artwork’s culture who is skilled in the appreciation of that kind of art. This discussion could be in either’s language, but if it calls for the use of art-technical terms it would be easier in the language of the culture to which the work belongs.

Professor Fongaro draws attention to a mode of understanding that I did not discuss: that in which a person learns in practical terms (under the direction of a resident artist) how to make the art in question. I agree that this is a useful route to understanding, and often makes clear very quickly the skills required to succeed in the art form. Philosophers distinguish *knowing that*—propositional or discursive knowledge—from *knowing how*—practical or applied knowledge. Mostly I was discussing the former but it is certainly appropriate also to consider the latter.

In her concise piece Professor Julie Nagam does not engage directly with my paper. She says: “Decoding artwork requires the geographical, historical, cultural, and societal knowledge necessary to understand the message portrayed in the work” (Nagam 2018).

This is the view I defended under the heading of “ontological contextualism” (Davies 2018a). Before a person can appreciate an artwork for the work that it is she must first locate it, so to speak. Artworks take their contents and identities in part via relations in which they stand to the art tradition within which they are created: to its works, history, genres, conventions, institutions, and practices. Accordingly, locating the artwork presupposes background knowledge of such matters. Cultural outsiders do not have this knowledge, whereas those raised within the relevant culture most often do. So without learning about the culture in question, the cultural outsider is not placed to identify and appreciate its artworks. The questions then become about how the cultural outsider sets about this learning and whether she can acquire sufficient cultural knowledge to be placed eventually to appreciate the work. My suggestion is that, with help, these goals can often be met.

Professor Nagam also objects that indigenous art scholars, like her, are held to an unreasonable double standard in being expected to be expert about the art both of their home culture and of the Western artworld. She may be right about this. But as I indicated at the beginning of this response, I think that any individual's art-knowledge is likely to be partial and incomplete, even about the art of her home culture.

Professor John Powell defends the position—orthogonal to the topic in hand, as he acknowledges—that George Dickie's institutional definition can enfranchise gardens as art, given a sufficiently generous notion of what an artworld is. The artworld as described by Dickie is an informal institution within which items attain art status as a result of their treatment. The (membership of the) artworld in which gardens are successfully presented as art is distinct from the (membership of the) artworld in which works of fine art are successfully presented as art, according to Professor Powell. Nevertheless, the roles and practices in both are sufficiently similar that some of the members in each world have the authority to confer art-status on its products.

The query that must be posed asks how Professor Powell is sure that he has identified an *artworld* in which gardens are art, as opposed to a *gardenworld* in which they are not. In responding, I think he is right to look for parallels in structure, function, and appreciative practices between the two. It might also be necessary, however, to make a comparison with the worlds of craft beers and cupcakes, because these too can involve public judging and appreciation but would not normally be classed as artworks or art forms.

Extending Dickie's definition to the art of other cultures reveals a problem with it. His account makes art relative to an artworld (and he has in mind the Western one). If there are many autonomous artworlds—one at least for each culture that makes art—then his definition is incomplete unless it goes on to explain what makes these somewhat different, independently operating artworlds all *artworlds*.

As I observed in the paper that opens this symposium, in tribal societies art might not be as highly institutionalized as it is in the West. Is that also a problem for Dickie's definition? Quite possibly. In any case, the very first artworks surely were created prior to any art institutions, which would have emerged only later as the practice of art-making became more regularized, so those artworks are not art in the way that Dickie's definition specifies.

Having just mentioned the very first artworks, I'd like to correct a misunderstanding of my view. Professor Powell writes: “[Davies] points out that the earliest painters, singers, poets, and so on, could not have been artists producing art because the concepts of ‘artist’ and ‘art’ had not yet evolved” (Powell 2018). But that is not my position. I claim they could and did produce art without having the concept. I wrote: “In any case, one can make art without a term or even a concept for it. The people who made the first art certainly had specific goals in mind but could not have thought of what they made as art, not until the relevant public practice was locally established and eventually named” (Davies 2018a).

What I suggest is that the early cave painters—let us assume that they are the first art-makers—did succeed in making art, because the goals they had in mind, when suitably executed, resulted in the production of art. What they could not do until the concept was in place, along with suitable linguistic terms, was to formulate their intentions or achievements as art-making ones. Similarly, the chef who made the first pizza intended to combine various ingredients thus and so, and thereby to make what people later recognized as the first pizza. But if the noun did not preexist the dish, then the chef did not (and could not) do what she did under the concept of pizza-making. She could make the first pizza but she couldn't describe what she did in those terms until they became available later.

In summary: Professor Akkach attributes to me a Western-centric view of art that I do not hold. I am interested in mutual, respectful communication across cultural boundaries, not in imposing

a reductive, essentialist perspective on others. My position is akin to that of Professor Chinn, who writes of fostering cross-cultural friendships. As well, I agree with Professor Nagam that artworks should be approached with appropriate knowledge of their cultural home—that is, of the art tradition they presuppose—because that shapes the identity and content of those works. Unlike Professor Powell, I am not sure whether the institutions of Western fine art should be seen as encompassing gardens, and I have reservations about George Dickie’s theory of art, on which he relies. I allow that conceptions of art differ in important respects from culture to culture, but unlike Professor Fongaro I predict we can find sufficient in common to start a cross-cultural conversation in which we might learn from the other about her artworks and art forms.

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<sup>1</sup> This is my term. I mean by it the cultural equivalent of *mansplaining*, the condescending and patronizing tendency of men to explain to women what the women already know and are likely to know better than the men do.

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