

WITTGENSTEIN –  
AESTHETICS AND  
TRANSCENDENTAL PHILOSOPHY

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Kjell S. Johannessen & Tore Nordenstam (eds./Hrsg.)

1981

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Tore Nordenstam (Bergen)

## Intention in Art

An intention is embedded in its situation, in human customs and institutions.

[Wittgenstein, *PI*, § 337.]

### 1. The relevance of intentions

When we don't understand a work of art and seek an explanation of it, we are often referred to the intentions of the artist. Intentional explanations seem to play a crucial role in the history of art. Here are some samples from the historiography of modern art:

Mondrian was quite clear about his aim: that of breaking down the object, and attaining a completely non-representational mode of expression. Against this, he was not quite sure which way he should choose to find forms that in reality corresponded to what he wished to express by his painting.<sup>1</sup>

The beholder, however, is intentionally left in the dark, unable to see the connexion between the actions, let alone their literary meaning.  
[Sixten Ringbom commenting on Kandinsky's "Stormbell".]<sup>2</sup>

When, during the Cubist adventure, anyone tried to ask questions of Picasso, his reply was: 'Il est défendu de parler au pilote.' The truth, of course, is that no artist, or very few artists, work in accordance with a theory and yet all their work conforms to an intention, and it is those intentions which the theorist can analyse with more or less success.<sup>3</sup>

But it has also been forcefully argued that appeal to intentions can never be appropriate in the aesthetic disciplines. In "The Intentional Fallacy" (1946) Wimsatt and Beardsley argued that it is never relevant to appeal to the author's intention in literary criticism.<sup>4</sup> For either the poet succeeded in doing what he intended to do, and in that case we need not consult anything but the resulting poem; or else he did not succeed, and then we need not worry about the intentions since our interest is in the existing poem and not in a poem which might have been produced in other circumstances. And if this is true of poems, it seems reasonable to assume that it is true of paintings and other works of art as well.

The target of Wimsatt's and Beardsley's critique was above all the romantic aesthetic epitomized in the writings of Benedetto Croce. According to Croce, the aim of historical interpretation is to "reintegrate in us the psychological

conditions which have changed in the course of history” in order to make us see the work of art “as its author saw it in the moment of production”. If this is taken to mean that we should step outside our own horizon in an attempt to identify ourselves with a spectator who lived in another period, historical interpretation in Croce’s sense becomes impossible, as Dilthey emphasized in the beginning of this century. We cannot annihilate our own concepts and practices when we approach the practices of earlier times or other places. The aim of the historian cannot be the re-enactment of earlier experiences in a hermeneutically naive sense of this phrase. Instead, one could say that the historian’s task is to reconstruct the conditions which made those experiences possible. With the distinction between naive re-enactment and historical reconstruction of aesthetic experiences at hand, it is possible to agree with the antiententionalist critique of romantic aesthetics without endorsing a wholesale rejection of all references to intentions in art.

In the following, I shall be particularly concerned with one aspect of the reconstruction of earlier aesthetic practices, viz. the role played by references to the artist’s intentions. To acquaint oneself with an artist’s intentions means to acquaint oneself with the artist’s practice. Intentions are embedded in practices, as Wittgenstein observed. To clarify some of the implications of this remark, I shall first consider the relations between intention and competence in general, and make some comments on the notion of practice in Wittgenstein’s later philosophy. Then I shall take up the problem of intention in art, using one of Piet Mondrian’s early paintings as a point of departure.

## 2. Intention and competence.

If you look at a man and say what he is doing, then you will usually say what the man already knows, “and again in most, though indeed in fewer, cases you will be reporting not merely what he is doing, but an intention of his—namely, to do that thing”, writes Elisabeth Anscombe in “Intention” (1957).<sup>5</sup> When we look at a man who is doing something, then the man’s intention of doing what he does is usually clear to us; for actions are normally taken to be intentional (and not done by mistake or negligence, for instance). And the same applies to the man’s intention in doing what he does. If we observe a driver getting out of his car and shifting a flat tyre, we know, in normal circumstances, that he is doing what he does intentionally—his intention of doing what he does is clear to us from the situation. And in normal circumstances we also know his intention in doing what he does, viz. to replace the flat tyre with an undamaged one in order to be able to continue his journey.

But how is it possible to see this from the situation? If I go to a foreign country, a good deal of the doings of the people in that society will be incomprehensible to me to start with. And if I observe a mechanic repairing the engine of a car, I can only describe what he is doing in the most general and imprecise terms. My lack of competence in the field of motor maintenance includes the lack of the

concepts which are necessary to be able to see and report correctly on what he is doing. When Miss Anscombe says that in most cases you will say what the man himself already knows, she has a certain kind of situation in mind, situations in which there is a high degree of shared competence.

In order to be able to decide that a man is doing an action of a certain kind, we need a number of skills, including the mastery of the concept under which the action falls and familiarity with the relevant set of rules and precedents. If one refers to the set of relevant concepts, rules and precedents as the "practice" or "institution" under which the action is done, then one can say that saying what a man does requires familiarity with the relevant practice or institution.

The same applies to the actor: a man cannot be said to be doing an action of a certain kind unless he is familiar with the relevant practice. Familiarity with the relevant practice is a necessary condition for the possibility of having the practice-relevant intentions, in the case of the actor, and for inferring the practice-relevant intentions from the situation, in the case of the spectator. If you take part in a game of bridge, for instance, there are a number of rules which you must abide to, including restrictions on the kinds of intentions you can have when playing the game. You cannot intend to beat your own partner in bridge. The necessity is a logical one. There is no room for such an intention within the practice we call "bridge". When one takes part in a rule-governed activity, a practice, one is thereby committed to having certain intentions and also committed not to have certain intentions. Those intentions to which a person who wants to take part in an activity of a certain kind is necessarily committed I shall call institutional(ized) intentions.

Institutionalized intentions may be contrasted with private intentions, those intentions which an individual might have irrespective of whether they are permissible within the practice or not. The apprentice who intends to beat his own partner in bridge has a private intention which happens to fall outside the social space defined by the concept of bridge. The motives one might have for playing bridge (for fun, for money, etc.) are also private intentions in relation to the game of bridge. This does not hinder them from being institutional intentions in relation to some other practices.

To find out about institutional intentions one must familiarize oneself with the relevant practice, and nothing more. No information on the practitioner's private wishes, plans or other aspects of his biography is relevant as far as institutional institutions are concerned, assuming that one knows the relevant practice.

It is easy to draw a fairly sharp distinction between institutional and private intentions in games like chess and bridge which are circumscribed by well-defined sets of rules. In art, not least modern art, the relations between private and institutional intentions are more complex; and the same applies to other practices of a more sophisticated nature, like scientific and political practices. It is obvious (to me at least) that some bits of information on the artists can help to clarify their works, and it is equally obvious that not all information on the private lives of the artists is equally relevant for our understanding of their works of art. The distinction between institutional and private intentions, as

we have introduced it here, hinges upon the possibility of identifying a practice in relation to which some of the practitioners' intentions emerge as institutional ones. The crucial question is then how to identify the practices which are relevant for our understanding of art. I shall try to shed some light on this question by considering an example. But before doing so, some further comments on the notion of practice presupposed in the quotation from Wittgenstein which was the starting-point for our reflections—"An intention is embedded in its situation, in human customs and institutions"—might not be amiss.

### 3. Wittgenstein's concept of practice

In *PI*, Wittgenstein uses the terms "practice", "custom", "use", and "institution" interchangeably. In § 199, e.g., it is stated that "to obey a rule, to make a report, to give an order, to play a game of chess, are *customs* (uses, institutions)", and in § 202 it is said that obeying a rule is a "practice". Wittgenstein also speaks of "techniques" and "language-games" in more or less the same sense. (Cf. e.g. § 23 where obeying an order is one of the examples given of language-games, and § 205 where "custom" and "technique" are used interchangeably.) The prime lesson of the first part of *PI* is that human action is rule-governed behaviour. To perform an action is to take part in a practice, and in order for this to be possible we have to have acquired the relevant concepts. (Cf. *PI*, § 208: "if a person has not yet got the concepts, I shall teach him to use the word by means of *examples* and by *practice*" ("Übung").) And, again, to learn to master a concept means to learn to master a technique. "To understand a language means to be master of a technique" (§ 199), viz. a way of structuring reality, a method of representation.

Against this background, one could sum up world-view which emerges from the pages on Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigation* in the following way: *Our world is a world of practices*. Our practices may be said to constitute the limits of our world: "The individual practice represents the limits of what is intelligible to us concerning that aspect of reality which is conceptualized in it, and all necessity pertaining to the language signs used in this practice arises from these very limits".<sup>6</sup>

In spite of the differences between the ways in which Kant and Wittgenstein approach the question of the conditions of our experience of the world, not to speak of the differences of their *answers* to the question they raise, it seems to me that there is a basic similarity between Wittgenstein's and Kant's enterprises which makes it justified to characterize also Wittgenstein's later philosophy as a kind of transcendental philosophy. "Transcendental", according to Kant, "is knowledge which has to do, not with objects, but with the conditions under which objects may be experienced." (Cf. Rudolf Haller's and Wolfgang Röd's clarifying comments on the term "transcendental" in this volume). Our practices, according to Wittgenstein, are such conditions for the experience of objects and, generally, for acting in the world.

When Wittgenstein says that intentions are embedded in their situations, in human customs and institutions, we could sum up by saying that intentions are embedded in practices. An aesthetic practice may be said to open up a social space for the expressive activities of the artists and the hermeneutic activities of the public. Familiarity with the relevant practice, including the concepts which help to constitute the practice, is a necessary condition for the possibility of experiencing objects of art. And so is familiarity with the institutions (practices) which surround the aesthetic practice in question (other aesthetic practices, educational practices, institutions of art like the art market, museums and journals). The medium of communication in aesthetic practices is the work of art. The aesthetically relevant intentions are, then, the intentions which have become embedded in the works of art in such a way that they can be experienced by well-informed participants who have acquired the necessary competence to take part in the practices in question. And now we turn to the promised example.

#### 4. Mondrian's "Evolution"

Round 1911 Piet Mondrian painted a triptych which he gave the title "Evolution":



It is a monumental work. The central piece measures ca. 183×87 cm, the two other panels 178×85 cm. The intensity of the work depends very much upon the colours. The body of the figure to the left is painted in a luminous blue colour, the background is in violet, the two emblems behind the shoulders are red. The body of the middle figure has the violet colour which forms the background of the left hand figure, and the background in the lower part of the central picture has the colour of the body to the left; the rest of the background is yellow, the emblems are whitish with a tinge of violet. In the right hand picture the colours are distributed roughly in the same way as in the left hand picture; the stars behind the shoulders are yellow in contrast to the red in the left picture and the whitish emblems in the central picture.

It is possible to appreciate a work like "Evolution" without any explanations at all, assuming only the kind of pictorial competence which can be expected of anyone who frequents art museums and galleries. "Evolution" and some similar works in the oeuvre of Piet Mondrian "may appeal to a present-day audience chiefly for the optical phenomena of intense colour luminosity and irradiation which they contain and which so clearly anticipate contemporary artistic trends", as one commentator puts it.<sup>7</sup> No explanations may be needed to get fascinated with the strangeness of the paintings, the feeling of mystery that they convey. The symbols which convey no clear meaning to the ordinary observer tend to heighten the sense of mysteriousness, and the same applies to the unclarity as to what kind of evolution that the pictures are about. It is not obvious in which way the three pictures should be read, to mention one of the puzzles that the paintings give rise to: should we take it that there is an evolution from left through the centre to the right, for instance, or does the central piece represent the highest stage of evolution?

It is possible that the painter intended the pictures to be approached in this way, as meditation objects with no clear meaning. But it is equally possible that the forms and colours were intended by the painter to convey more definite meanings. The yellow star is a figure which is loaded with symbolic significance in our culture. What do the two stars stand for in this particular work of art? And why are the nipples and the navel of the left and central figures painted as small triangles, whereas they are represented as diamonds in the picture to the right? Again, the triangles to the left point downwards, in the middle they point upwards. Should this be taken to indicate that the right hand picture is intended as a synthesis of the two other pictures? Are the emblems in the left and central pictures intended to convey any particular meaning? Do the open and closed eyes carry symbolic meanings? Are the three figures intended to be interpreted as three stages in the evolution of one person or should they be taken to symbolize (say) stages in the evolution of mankind? Or is there rather an intended ambiguity here?

If we are interested in understanding the meaning that Mondrian intended the pictures to convey, it is obvious that we need further explanations. The explanations we need are such as will help us to build up the competence that Mondrian assumed in his public. The intended meaning of the pictures is the

meaning which arises for the beholder who has acquired the assumed competence. Borrowing a term from literary theory, one might refer to a beholder with the required competence as “the implicit beholder”.

Some biographical facts prove valuable at this juncture. Mondrian was interested in theosophy, a preoccupation which did not have the sectarian connotations for the artistic strata in the beginning of the century as it has for most of us today. He joined the Dutch theosophical society in 1909, not long before painting the “Evolution”. On the cards of membership of the society, the emblem of theosophy, the yellow sixpointed star, was printed. Mondrian’s membership card was one of the few possessions which he brought with him from Europe to New York during the war, along with some theosophical books. One of the books which Mondrian kept to the end of his life was a collection of lectures given by the secretary of the Dutch theosophical society in 1908, presenting the teachings of Rudolf Steiner, Madame Blavatsky and other leading theosophists. Evolution, as it turns out, was a central notion in the teachings of Blavatsky and Steiner. Madame Blavatsky taught that evolution was the basic feature of the world, replacing the Christian concept of Creation with the concept of Evolution in an attempt to explain how the world works. It is possible to read Mondrian’s “Evolution” against the background of Blavatsky’s theory of the three spirits actuating man: “The first is the spirit of the elements (terrestrial body and vital force in its brute condition), the second, the spirit of the stars (sideral or astral body—the soul); the third is the *Divine spirit*”.<sup>8</sup>

It would probably be wrong to try to read “Evolution” as a painstaking attempt to translate the details of e.g. Mme Blavatsky’s doctrines into pictorial language. But the theosophical writings give some idea of the kind of setting that Mondrian seems to have assumed his painting to have. If theosophical ideas were widespread at the time, he could count on a rather specific aesthetic competence in his public. He could assume an ideal beholder who knows e.g. that “the respectively downward and upward pointing triangles basically indicate the opposing principles of matter and spirit which sometimes interpenetrate and achieve balance in the ‘sacred hexagram’”, to quote again from Welsh.<sup>9</sup>

To sum up: we have briefly considered two ways of situating Mondrian’s “Evolution”, within the practice of modern art in general and within a particular variety of theosophy. Against the background of the available information, it seems reasonable to assume that Mondrian assumed an implicit beholder with some competence in both those fields when he painted “Evolution”. The intentions embedded in “Evolution” may then be characterized as those features of the work which emerge as intended to be seen as intended, given a beholder with the intended competence. If Mondrian intended to communicate a specific meaning—call it “C”—by painting the sixpointed stars in the right hand panel of “Evolution”, then he must have intended the observer to attribute that intention to him, and in order for this to be possible he must have given the stars certain features which he could count on to be recognized by the observer as intended to communicate C.



## 5. Intention, programme and practice

The kind of intentions which are relevant for the understanding of art are the intentions which have been successfully embedded in works of art and which, therefore, can be read from the works themselves, given a certain competence in the beholder.

A contemporary painter producing for the market cannot count on specific competencies in the public in the way a Renaissance entrepreneur could do.<sup>10</sup> But he can assume a public which is willing to acquire the competence which a new work requires. Mondrian's rectangular compositions from the twenties and thirties assume an implicit beholder with a competence which is somewhat different from that assumed by "Evolution", although the differences may be smaller than one might expect at first. Throughout, Mondrian assumed a willingness to learn through theoretical writings on art and, above all, through working with art, learning to see in the relevant ways by making the relevant comparisons: "To truly appreciate something new, one has to approach it with intuitive feeling, and one must look at it a great deal, and compare".<sup>11</sup>

The comparisons which are relevant for the understanding of modern art are not least comparisons within the oeuvre of a particular artist. An artist's intentions are not an assembly of isolated items. Rather, they make up a programme, and that programme can be seen from the works themselves, given that the programme has been successfully realized and that the observer has the required competence.

The competence required to see Mondrian's pictures in the intended way can be built up through a joint study of his theoretical writings and pictures. In Renaissance art, the onlooker must find the right viewpoint in order for the perspectivistic picture to emerge in the intended way. Tintoretto's "Communion" in San Giorgio Maggiore in Venice is a good illustration: the painting is placed to the right of the altar, in a ninety degree angle to it, and only when looked at from the point of view of a person kneeling before the altar does it emerge in the right perspective. Only from this view-point does the painted table look parallel to the altar, emphasizing the parallel between the ongoing communion and the first event of this kind. (I owe the example to my colleague Gunnar Danbolt.)

The physical requirements are not unimportant when we come to Mondrian's pictures; but the more simplified the paintings become, the more important does the intellectual and aesthetic setting become. The verbal commentary provided by Mondrian (e.g. in his numerous papers in "De Stijl") is indeed helpful for the observer trying to find the intended view-point. But, as the painter emphasized, the "theories" were developed afterwards, in the sense that the motor in his development was the ongoing experiment with new forms of painting. The aesthetic setting, the situation of a particular work in the sequence of works which make up the artist's oeuvre, is the importance one.

Like other original artists, Mondrian may be said to have set up his own aesthetic practice, a subpractice within the overarching practice of art, a new member of the family of practices which we refer to as "art". To situate a work like

“Evolution” within this practice we must compare it with Mondrian’s other works. There are some paintings which tend to make “Evolution” more understandable to us through the parallels that they exhibit. This applies e.g. to the watercolour “Passion Flower” (1902—3?) and to the oil painting “Devotion” (ca. 1908), where similar emblems are used as in “Evolution”. The most striking parallel is “The Red Mill”, an oil painting from 1910—11, in which both forms and colours are strongly reminiscent of the language of “Evolution”.

The kind of understanding that we get through situating a work in the context of an artist’s oeuvre belongs, I think, to the things which can be better shown than described in words (like the tone of a clarinet). The analysis of style (as the phenomenon is called in art history) is largely a matter of seeing things in the right way.

When one goes through the sequence of Mondrian’s pictures, one gets a strong sense of continuity. There is a development in the direction of simplification and abstraction from the impressionistic and expressionist pictures in the beginning of his career through the cubistic works to the “plus-minus” works and the long series of pictures built solely on rectangular forms. It is this development which I refer to as Mondrian’s programme. Not that he formulated a programme which he then carried out. The overall intention of Mondrian’s work may, in retrospect, be characterized as an intention to find out what he really intended. The result was a process of continuous searching and experimenting with the overarching aim of finding more and more adequate expressions for the aim that was gradually becoming clear through the work itself.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Kruskopf, Erik, *Shaping the Invisible. A Study in the Genesis of Non-Representational Painting, 1908—1919* (Helsinki 1976), pp. 117—118.
- <sup>2</sup> Ringbom, Sixten, *The Sounding Cosmos. A Study in the Spiritualism of Kandinsky and the Genesis of Abstract Painting* (Turku 1970), p. 72.
- <sup>3</sup> Hess, Hans, *Pictures as Arguments* (London 1975), p. 36.
- <sup>4</sup> Wimsatt, W. K. & M. C. Beardsley, “The Intentional Fallacy”, *Sewanee Review*, Vol. LIV (1946). Reprinted *i.a.* in *On Literary Intention*, ed. David Newton-De Molina (Edinburgh 1976).
- <sup>5</sup> Anscombe, Elizabeth, *Intention* (Oxford 1957), pp. 8—9.
- <sup>6</sup> Johannessen, Kjell S., “Art and Aesthetic Praxis”, in: *Contemporary Aesthetics in Scandinavia*, eds. Lars Aagaard-Mogensen & Göran Hermerén (Lund 1980), p. 87.
- <sup>7</sup> Welsh, R. P., “Mondrian and Theosophy”, in: *Centennial Catalogue Piet Mondrian*, editions Galerie Beyerler, *s.d.*, p. 51.
- <sup>8</sup> Mme Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled*, Vol. 1 (New York 1877), quoted in Welsh, *op. cit.*
- <sup>9</sup> Welsh, *op. cit.*, p. 47.
- <sup>10</sup> Cf. Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy* (Oxford 1972).
- <sup>11</sup> Mondrian quoted in Hans L. C. Jaffé, *De Stijl* (London 1970), p. 121.