



Responding a Work of Art

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Abstract

Viewers view a work of art, and then appreciate it, comment on it, interpret it or/and derive meanings. Sometimes, two or more readers find same meaning, but most of the time, different readers find different meanings in the same work of art. While listening to the responses of the viewers, the questions arise: what is the meaning of that work of art? Is there single meaning? Or, are there multiple meanings? Which one is valid meaning? How can we respond to a work art? What are the methods of interpreting and critiquing a work of art? This article attempts to address these questions. When we go through the history of art and criticism, we find that there are many ways to respond an artwork. The perspectives and methods of interpretations are still evolving. Thus, there is not a fixed perspective to look at a work of art. We can respond the work of art in multiple ways. In other words, the viewers themselves determine the way of viewing the arts. This study attempts to support this statement. This is a qualitative research, for it goes through the secondary sources like articles and books on art history, theory and criticism and traces multiple perspectives on art.

Keywords: aesthetic pleasure, creation, expression, form, representation, technique

Introduction

A work of art is a creative expression of an artist. It is new, and the novelty and innovation provides new experience to the viewers, readers and audience. Despite the fact that a work of art may have meaning, message and moral lesson, the essential element of an artwork is the aesthetic dimension that provides delight and pleasure to the audience (Kant, 1949). It may include political argument or philosophy but what matters most is the beauty and

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joy. Film, fiction, poetry, painting, sculpture, architecture, music and dance are the genres of art. We watch movie, we identify with the protagonist, imaginatively we participate in the story and action, then, we smile, laugh or cry. The viewer becomes one with the work of art forgetting the external world. The effect, experience, sadness or joy provided by the film is the aesthetic pleasure. The figures of speech or techniques that contribute to create sensation are the aesthetic elements. A work of art has aesthetic elements. The artwork and the audience, the viewer and the viewed, the subject and the object become one on the process of appreciation (Adams, 1992). We enjoy reading a novel, and keep on reading for hours and hours because of the pleasure that we get from the narrative. We listen some music and songs again and again though sometimes we do not know the meaning at all. We keep on listening due to the aesthetic pleasure. We even enjoy listening to the songs in unknown languages due to the rhythm and melody in them. We watch people dancing in the folk music and we never ask: what is the meaning of this dance? The pleasure is the prime focus in a work of art. The meaning, message and philosophy are not essential elements in a work of art though they may exist there.

A work of art is new, creative and innovative (Aristotle, 2019). It is different from all the other things and other works of art. It is unique like a living organism. Two human beings are different, so is art. Finger prints of two people are different. Similarly, a work of art has its own signature. When two works are similar, one of them is not artwork. It is only pretention and acting of art.

Appreciation of art is viewing and enjoying art. Writing an appreciation of art is to describe, analyze and state how the beauty has been created and how it affected the viewer, to trace the techniques, composition and form that provided aesthetic pleasure.

Interpretation of art is to find the meaning and significance of the work (Adams, 1992). We see something on the canvas and we understand something else. We see images, symbols, lines, colors, shapes, texture and pattern, and we sense they signify more than that (Sharma, 2022). We derive the meaning by connecting the diverse elements within the work.

Art criticism shows the strength and weakness of a work of art in addition to description, analysis and interpretation. Before critiquing a work of art, we describe it and trace various elements of arts. The form is linked to the contents and their significance. Art criticism talks about art, makes statement on art, supports it and shows the strength of the work (Adams, 1992).

Looking at a work of art means the way we view the creation. It is a world view or the point of view of the viewer. An interpretation and criticism of a work of art has the point of view of the critic. Knowingly or unknowingly, we apply our world view while looking at a work art and making statements on it. There are many theories that determine our

perspectives. However, it does not mean that we should have the knowledge of art theory to view and enjoy a work of art. The theories may be used to critique a work of art. We can respond a work of art in multiple ways. The meaning and response depends on the viewers and context. The viewer or critic determines his own way to look at a work of art. To support this statement, the discussion section presents some world views on a work of art.

Research Methodology

The research area in this study is the art in general, and the focus is on the way how we view the art, the way we look at a work of art. The article presents various ways to look at the creative work. New approaches to look at art are still evolving. Thus, there is not a fixed way to view the work. Individual viewer has his own way to see and appreciate artwork, and nobody can dictate him enjoy the art in certain way. This is the qualitative research, for it takes multiple art theories to support the thesis statement, and understanding of art theories and their application can be different from one critic to other critic. Secondary sources like journal articles and history of art and criticism have been used to locate different point of views on a work of art.

Discussion of critical views on art

A work of art is a creation of new thing which provides aesthetic pleasure to the creator as well as the viewers, readers and audience. Art may have some message or moral lessons, but it is not always essential. Nevertheless, it is always expected that a work of art has the power to provide a sense of beauty and arouse aesthetic pleasure (Gilbert, 1998). It means when we listen to music, we get joy. When we dance, we have a sort of thrilling experience. When we go through a masterpiece of literature, we identify with the characters forgetting ourselves and get new experience. We read the work again, for it gives us delight and rapture. There are multiple ways to look at a work of art.

There are different theories of creation in different periods of time (Lee, 2020). Even in the same period of time, different artists have different theories (Gilbert, 1998). Even the same artist has different art theory while creating different work of art. This is the creative dimension of art. Innovation, novelty and beauty are the essential elements of art (Barasch, 1998). As the artist uses his own unique technique of creation, the viewers can use their own way to enjoy the work of art.

A work of art can be the mirror to the nature. Some artworks refer to the external world and represent the things in nature (Plato, 1957). Human nature is such that imitation, pretending and acting give more pleasure than the real thing. We dislike the speech of some political leaders but we enjoy the caricature of the leader created by an artist. The images and figures in the art can be the representation of objects, people and events.



When the link is identified between a work of art and the things in the world, we get a sort of relief and a sense of comfort from comprehension. We love to see our own image in the mirror. We keep on glancing even in the glasses of shop-windows in cities.

Sometimes, a work of art refers to the nature or the external world but the picture is ideal and better than the scene in the nature. We can see how art improves the nature (Aristotle, 2019). In nature, some things are beautiful and some things are ugly. Ignoring the errors and ugliness, art improves the nature. Artist adds beautiful things from his imagination. This is the creative dimension of art (Adams, 1992). We can respond a work of art in terms of imitation and creation. We can explore how it relates to the nature and goes beyond it. We can attempt to trace what ideals the work of art tries to capture. People switch to song, music, dance, film, photography and painting from the ordinary life, for the arts present the better world. The apples of artist are sweeter than the real apple in figurative sense.

Some works of art convey moral lessons along with aesthetic pleasure. They can teach how we can make our life better. Along with delight, they change our manner, way of life, make us able to adjust in the context, amend our vision of life and refine civilization (Sharma, 2023). The paintings in Sistine Chapel, *patachitra* (narrative scroll painting), illuminations in *Visnudharma* manuscript, visual narrations of *Jatak*, and the *Mahabharata* tell us about the duties of human beings and the consequences of corruption and sin. While looking at a work of art, we can focus on what we can learn from this creation.

We can learn about the life of artist from his artworks. He expresses his hidden desires in painting, sculpture, story or film (Freud, 1977). What he cannot fulfil in real life he fulfils it by creating fictional world. In real life our freedom is limited due to socio-cultural norms but in imaginary world, the world of art, he has freedom of expression. His motives are fulfilled by his characters. This is a sort of substitute gratification of suppressed desires. Arts can be the medium to reveal biographical information.

We can also get the clue about the reader or viewer's personal inner life through artworks he views (Freud, 1977). The reader or the viewer has also suppressed his desires and he is trying to fulfill them. He reads the book and watches the film of his interest. He fulfils his desires through fiction, film, music and paintings. Seeing the pattern of his choice of artworks, we can guess his likes and interest. Furthermore, we can know about ourselves noting down what kinds of paintings we enjoy viewing, novels we like to read and films we watch.

Some artworks do not have fixed message and meaning. The art forms, colors and shapes stand for themselves. The new technique and form provides aesthetic pleasure. What matters most is the beauty. The composition creates beauty for its own sake. The rhythm of music, melody, colors and forms takes us along with it. We forget the time and space

and become one with the work. The subject and object are united creating the experience of epiphany. We listen to the song and watch movie without the concern of meaning and theme. The aesthetic form itself is its own significance (Ockvirk et. Al, 2002).

Some artworks present struggle between two groups or two people – the boss and the workers, the haves and have not, the colonizer and the colonized, the authority and ordinary people. We can dig out the causes and effects of suppression, oppression, exploitation and rebellion. The conflicts and contradictions in society, culture and nation are mildly revealed in the visual works and prepare ground for uprising and change.

Few artworks leave gaps and blanks in the canvas, that is, something is visible and something is invisible. The hidden and unsaid thing can be crucial and more important. It carries the message and the meaning. When it is said directly, the power and the authority may not be able to digest it, for the artwork attacks the authority. Thus, the artist uses the technique to create distance between the artwork and the external world. The interpretation reveals the meaning of the gap.

Artworks also recycle the myths, rituals and tradition. They take reference from the age old narratives. Sometimes, they highlight the mythical themes and characters, and sometimes, the works subvert the traditional icons, images, symbols and beliefs (Sharma, 2009). They point out the lapses and take corrective measure. Rooted to the tradition, they connect to the present context (Sharma, 2020). Due to the existence of multiple dimensions, the work may generate layers of interpretations (Sharma, 2018).

In their artworks, some artists question superstition, and the existence of spirit, soul, heaven, hell and God. They focus on the fact and science. They believe that this life is better than the life after death. They give emphasis on human emotion, feeling, human value and happiness. They celebrate the beauty of human body. They accept the human power for reasoning rejecting the blind belief on the unknown (Levinson, 2003).

Some creative compositions present their dissatisfaction toward the present society and context. The artist's imagination flies toward the nostalgia of remote past or the forthcoming future. The focus is on the romanticism and the brighter side of life. The dissatisfaction and discomfort in real life give way to the momentary fancy and colorful imagination. It is a break from the boredom.

Some artworks present ontological quest, the search of the self and the existence of universe. They ask questions as “Who am I? How was I created? Who created me? How was the world created?” This is the exploration of being, the source of our existence. The focus on thinking, meditation, observation and experiment. This is the process of making visible to the invisible. Nevertheless, the process of quest is graceful, mild and aesthetic, for the medium of search is creative work.

We speak something about a work of art, we make statement on it. In a sense, this is a critique on a creative work. The language of art is universal like music and objects of the world. People may enjoy and understand it irrespective of different time, place and culture (Ockvirk et. Al, 2002). The art of distance place and different culture also can be enjoyed. Looking at a work of art is a pleasurable experience. We can enjoy art without getting any training, but it can be better appreciated if we have certain skills and knowledge (Freeland, 2002).

Knowledge of critical tools can be helpful for aesthetic judgments, art appreciation and criticism (Adams, 1992). We trace the elements and aspects that make a work of art as an aesthetic object. Art criticism shows strength and weakness in a work art. The judgement of artwork means pointing out the degree or quality of it. We can use these tools to reveal our aesthetic experience and to explain how a particular work of art touches or affects us (DeWitte et. Al, 2015).

Art is autonomous whole. A work of art is independent and free like an individual. We can talk about art in reference to itself connecting colors, lines, rhythm, proportion, perspective, symbols, images, paradox, metaphor, analogy, etc. and seeing an organic unity in a work of art as an aesthetic object. Our focus should be the work of art and the elements within it not the artist and the world around. Colors not only represent the objects but also signify something more (Levinson, 2003). Dark colors may signify death, the bright colors may signify happiness. Lines can be strong, bold, thin, weak and confusing like the human beings. Rhythm is the music and melody in art (Gilbert, 1998). It is the essential element of all arts that provides aesthetic pleasure (Kant, 1949). Proportion can be natural and distorted. The conscious and intentional distortion may have certain meaning. Image creates picture in our mind. Symbol is an image that signifies beyond itself (Sharma, 2021). Paradox brings opposite things together. Metaphor and analogy compare images and events with something else. A work of art has organic unity, that is, all the elements are connected to each other and become one like in the living being (Osborne, 2009).

We can also discuss art in relation to its technique and form (Freeland, 2002). Techniques and forms are the ways how the contents are presented. The same subject matter can be presented in different forms like in the form of speech, instruction, order or art. Art becomes art because of its form, manner of presentation and style. Love has been the subject matter of art for centuries. But different love stories have different forms and provide different pleasure to the readers. Form renews our perception and de-automatizes our automatized experience. Because of form, we see the thing that we have not seen. The art form can be realistic, impressionistic, cubist, expressionist, futurist, Dadaist, abstractionist, surrealist, minimalist and so on (Osborne, 2009).

We can discuss art considering the pragmatic aspects asking and responding such questions: Is the artwork useful to the viewers? Does it give moral lessons? On the other hand, art can be for art's sake: Art has purposive-ness without purpose. All arts are useless in terms of benefit, profit and advantage. The sole purpose of art is aesthetic pleasure and the enjoyment of the art form (Kant, 1949).

Art can express our desires, wishes and dreams. It can be the presentation of personal life, emotions, feelings and experiences. Images and symbols can be condensed and displaced using metaphors and metonymy. Life of artist and viewer can be revealed through a work of art. Art can work as therapy, for art satisfies our needs in alternative ways (Sharma, 2017). Art can be connected to archetypes cultural rituals, collective unconscious, myth and the memory the community (Jung, 1936).

We can trace the presence of underlined conditions in art (De Saussure, 1916). Artwork may be structured on the basis of binary oppositions like primary/ secondary; more important/ less important; center/ margin; man/ woman; city/ town; light/ darkness; life/ death; signifier/ signified. There can be juxtaposition of black and white, good and evil, rich and poor. One can be dominant over the other. The society itself is structured like an art. It has a system governed by invisible codes.

For some viewers, art can dismantle the illusion of organization, composition and unity. We can see plurality, contingency, relativity, and open-ended-ness in a work of art. A sign can be interpreted in multiple ways (Derrida, 1991). The priority of the binary opposition may be shifted. The existing values may be subverted, questioned and menaced. The artwork can be chaotic form without organization signifying multiple meanings or no meanings at all. It may lack the uniting and binding thread. It all depends on the viewers, context and perspectives of the audience.

A creative work can be the instrument for propaganda and politics. A work of art can question and resist the authority and power. It can be the voice for the voiceless, giving space to the people in margin like women, working class, ethnic minority and the colonized (Marx, 1986).

There are multiple ways to interact with art. We may use this knowledge as a tool to look at artworks and create criticism on individual art works on the spot (DeWitte, 2015). We may use these perspectives to generate the contents of our writing. Aesthetics studies about art and beauty giving focus on the principles of creation and interpretation (Levinson, 2003).

Painterly devices and tools to convey the artist's theme are color, line, texture, structure, composition and light (Adams, 1992). The vision or intuition of the artist are expressed through the skillful use of these elements (Croce, 2017). Craftsmanship paves the way for artistic expression. The innovation of an artist makes his work more creative and attractive. Each work of art is like an individual having its own unique identity. Everyman

is different from other man. The element that makes him different is his unique identity. Identity does not come by imitating the fashion but it emerges from within (Sharma, 2014). When a work of art is similar to other work of art, it is no longer a work of art but a craft. Appreciating a work of art is never-ending process. So, even the age-old artworks still engage people of our time.

The art forms like painting, sculpture and architecture present the dreams, wishes, intuitions, world views and values of their cultures, communities and the way of their life along with the responses to the contexts (Barasch, 1998). Artworks leave traces of civilizations in the human history. Arts represent the spirit of the nation.

Different art forms render the imagination of the artists along with the representation of mood and atmosphere of the then society and people (Osborne, 2009). In artworks, there is hide and seek of the past in the present. In the contemporary artworks, early trends appear and disappear in playful manner. Sometimes, similar things come in disguise as the slight change and twist in the fashion. In some cases, the old fashion becomes the latest one. However, every innovative artwork comes with new flavor, taste and perception.

Unless one is perverted or consciously imitates other person, he has his own form, voice, manner and footprints. However, most of us may have been infected with chronic obsession that we lose confidence in ourselves that we are valuable. Generally, we feel that we are useless, we do not have concept, we do not have good idea, so, we follow the patterns of others, we try to become like them. But externally, we boast of greatness. Then, neither we remain ourselves nor we can become like them. We drift around here and there like a ship without the captain having no direction. The ship moves in the direction of wind. I have seen many critics that speak like other. This attitude has been difficult to cure. My assumption is that we have seen such situation because of the misunderstanding about art and ourselves.

The answer to the question, ‘what is the meaning of this art?’ is ever shifting. The critical perspectives are changing according to culture, time, place, community and even the critic himself. The meaning of art is not fixed. There is not only one meaning but many. As time passes, new theory comes forth breaking away from the earlier one. A new work of art is innovative and creative always having new technique, form, style and/ or concept (Gilbert, 1998).

Some arts are guided by passion and feeling whereas other by thinking and reasoning. Few works strike balance between passion and intellect. Passion gives way to spontaneity and rhythm whereas reasoning makes the movement systematic avoiding mess and chaos. Passion swings the viewer quickly and easily. A masterpiece purifies the audience through catharsis (Aristotle, 2019). The viewers feel refreshed. Arts provide delight and aesthetic pleasure while teaching useful lessons to the viewers.

The experience of sublime in creativity is beyond our imagination (Kant, 1949). The condition becomes unusual or unexpected. The awareness of subject and object is lost. The subject is not aware where he is, what he is doing, and what happened to him. For example, you are at the sea bank when tsunami comes forth. What is your experience when the sea water covers you? Nevertheless, the experience of sublime is subjective. One thing can be sublime for some people whereas the same thing may not affect others at all. There can be two kinds of artworks. Some artworks provide you pleasure. They are beautiful. You can lose yourself in sublime artworks. You forget yourself and the world.

Art can inspire to realize absolute spirit, universal spirit, world spirit or brahma (Hegel, 2018). Art captures the spirit of the things and leaves the matter. For example, the painting of Mt. Dhawalagiri captures the spirit of Mt. Dhawalagiri but in the painting, there are no physical matters like soil, rocks and snow. Yet, we can see the images of those things in the painting. A work of art is like single living organism having connections of multiple elements. It is a synthesis of thesis and antithesis.

Some artists give space to the voice of the poor, ethnic minorities, women and the marginalized (Sharma, 2019). Art reveals the clash of classes and interest. The social reality is reflected in art. Artists leaves something unsaid expecting the viewer's participation to fill the blank space. If they openly criticize the authority, the artists will be silenced or annihilated by them. The job of critics is to find the significance of those gaps and silences. This is the creative criticism through forms and techniques in an aesthetic form. There can be distance between what the artist shows and what he signifies.

We cannot see concrete purpose of art in life, yet art has been existing from very beginning of civilization when human beings were living in caves. Cavemen created art for the rehearsal of hunting animals. In contemporary context, art can assist life in many ways as to attract companion, gain prestige and adjust in society.

According to Tolstoy, art is the infection of feeling, that is, art touches us, affects us. We identify with the situation or character. We enter the art and forget the worldly existence for sometimes. In other words, art provides aesthetic pleasure. We can state how the creative form rendered, infected and put the memorable mark upon us.

Expressing the inner feelings, emotions and wishes in artworks, the artist gets relief (Greenblatt & Gunn, 1992). Sometimes, the dream world with contrary images in free association are present in the visual work, for the creative urge goes beyond the artist's control. There is a sense of spontaneous rhythm.

Arts provide rasa (rapture or relish) to the viewers. In other word, rasa is aesthetic pleasure in a work of art. The pleasure can be related love, humor, kindness, sympathy, anger, bravery, fear, hatred, wonder, devotion, peace, enlightenment or nirvana. The aesthetic dimensions of art appeal to our senses and the abstract qualities within human beings.



One rasa can be more dominant in a work art though there can be the presence of other rasas as well.

At this point we have already seen a series of critical perspectives on a work of art like representation of nature, creation of aesthetic object, infection of feeling, expression of intuition, imagination of brighter world, learning moral lessons through aesthetic experience, rhythmic release of hidden desires, realization of absolute spirit, presentation of technique and form, tracing underlined conditions, purposiveness without purpose, open-endedness and multiple significance.

One critical point of view is different from the other. These are only few perspectives on art. New ways of looking at a work of art are still evolving. Every viewer can have his own way to respond art. Every art has its own distinct codes of creation. It means there is no fixed definition of art. One art is always distinct from the other. Otherwise, it is no longer the art but a craft, pretention, parody or the acting of art. In the same way, a work of art can be appreciated in multiple ways.

Conclusion

The ways of looking at art differ from one another. A critical comment differs from the other like an individual person differs from the other the other individual. The interpretations are ever changing depending on time, space, viewer and critic. New critical theories are evolving even today, and this process seems to go on even in the future. A work of art is not only representation of external world but also creative work. It can be the expression of intuition. A work can provide moral message to some viewers whereas it can be only aesthetic object for others, having beauty for its own sake. The creative work can express the human desires making inside out of the creator. There are other many perspectives. Moreover, there are as many perspectives as the viewers. We cannot say one theory is right and other theory is wrong. A viewer or critic can follow one theory fully or partially on the process of creation, or he can formulate his own theory to look at the aesthetic object. And the latter one is considered far better in the field of art.

Art is related to the contemporary context and people's mood and attitude. We can respond an artwork in relation to its context. As people, society, cultures and civilizations are changing, the way of looking at art is also changing. One reading cannot be like the other reading. A reader or the viewer is supposed to have the courage to respond the texts and visuals in his own way. When we have confidence and faith on ourselves, this is the most exciting, comfortable and playful activity. The repetition of same manner, technique and expression stinks like stale food. One can distinguish purposeful distortion from the lack of skill to create realistic work. There is difference between aesthetic abstract form and random splash and spatter of colors on the canvas without rhythm, coherence and pattern. Our perception of art with the faith on the senses of the self reveals true nature of an artwork.

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