

Discussion Notes

Kamhi and Torres on Meaning in Ayn Rand's Esthetics

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In their challenging essay "Meaning in Art" (*Aristos*, vol. 6, no. 6, Sep. 1997), Michelle Kamhi and Louis Torres continue their examination of Ayn Rand's esthetic theory. They point to "seeming contradictions" in her discussion of subject and style, claiming them to be inconsistencies between her stated principles and her interpretive statements which "appear to undercut the clarity and credibility of her theory as a whole." While there is much of value in their essay, I hope in these brief comments to offer some insights into unnoticed subtleties in Miss Rand's analysis which indicate that things are not quite as serious as Kamhi and Torres paint them as being. They begin by noting that Rand is thoroughly Aristotelian in her view that the fundamental meaning in all art is some aspect of human life and values. But how does art convey meaning? On this issue, they claim, Rand has not been completely consistent in her published statements. In support of this claim, they cite Rand's criticism as "Naturalistic" of Rembrandt's portraying a side of beef or Vermeer's depicting everyday domestic subjects. This, they say, suggests that "subject" for Rand means "the aspects of external reality which constitute the artist's starting point . . . what he chooses to 'selectively re-create' in his work," and that "such external subject matter [is] the 'end' to which all the other attributes of the work . . . are the means." They say that Rand has an "occasional confusion [between] external subject matter (the existential phenomena a work nominally 'refers to' or 'is about') with the ultimate content, or meaning, of a work of art. . ." I take strong issue with this. When Rand says art is a re-creation of reality, she does not mean that it is a re-creating of some

thing from reality, and she would never refer to a painting, for instance, as being about or referring to a side of beef. As I argue in "The Essence of Art" (*Objectivity*, Vol. 2, No. 5) this is mythology which has been perpetrated by theorists such as Susanne Langer and John Hospers.

Their critiques of the "imitation" and "re-creation" models of art show them to be trapped in a concrete-bound focus on the secondary level of things in the artwork, instead of addressing the nature of the artwork as a whole. Instead, as Leonard Peikoff has pointed out (*Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, p. 417), art is fundamentally a microcosm—a sort of little reality, as it were. The re-creation is, at root, the re-creation in a new (and necessarily finite, limited, selective) form of the reality we live in; and this microcosmic form, by the very selectivity of what is included or not, conveys an abstract view of the world. It is certainly true that this form, to be intelligible, must have a coherent subject—i.e., it must, as its central feature, present coherent objects or (as in music) melodic patterns. However, those objects or patterns are there not to replicate or copy something from the real world, but to serve, as Kamhi and Torres themselves say, as "the principal bearer of meaning" or, in Rand's words, as the means of "express[ing] a view of man's existence" ("Art and Sense of Life," *The Romantic Manifesto*, p. 40). And when Rand says that the subject indicates "what aspects of human experience the artists regards . . . as worthy of being re-created and contemplated," she does not mean concretes; instead, she is referring to abstract views, such as the heroic and unusual vs. the tedious and mundane. Naturally, to be contemplable, such abstract aspects of experience must be embodied or concretized in an image of an object; but Rand's objection first and foremost is to what aspects of experience the image is assigned to carry—and not any existential concrete that the image may resemble. It is the turning of art to the relatively unimaginative portrayal of a side of beef as a carrier of the abstraction of the mundane or the irrelevant that she objects to—as against the relatively imaginative projection of a heroic, assertive human being as a carrier of that abstraction. Is it possible that I am wrong, and that Rand really did mean concretes? After all, in "The Goal of My Writing" (TRM, p. 166) she states: "It is the selectivity in regard to subject . . . that I hold as the primary, the essential, the cardinal aspect of art. In literature, this means: the story—which means: the plot and the characters—which means: the kind of men and events that a writer chooses to portray." Doesn't this sound like concretes? No. Rand is very precise here. She does not just say that a writer chooses to portray "men and events" but the KIND of men and events. As in: heroic men, tumultuous events vs. scoundrels, sinister events, etc. Not

as in: Andrew Carnegie and the events comprising the building of his business empire. (To avoid possible confusion on this: yes, an author may draw upon concrete persons or events for inspiration, but a novel so inspired is not, or ought not to be, a portrayal of those concretes. It is a portrayal, instead, of the kind of people/events that those concretes inspire or exemplify. And yes, an author has to concretize "the kind of men and events," but that image of a concrete is not the same concrete that inspired the portrayal. Rand said something similar about visual art in "Art and Cognition," (TRM, p. 47.) Nevertheless, perhaps Rand did mean concretes, after all. In Peikoff's comments about Rand's definition of art including "selectivity in regard to subject" (OPAR, p. 440), he notes that an artist "is free to express his viewpoint by choosing the concretes he regards as best suited to his purpose." Again, doesn't this sound like concretes? My brief rejoinder is that this comment by Peikoff leads in his text into the quote of Rand cited above, so it should receive the same interpretation. The context of his comment is Rand's observation that an artist is not portraying things from reality, but kinds of things that represent a metaphysical point of view.

However, to reflect further specifically on what Peikoff said: when he uses the word "concrete" here, he is not referring to concrete things from the environment, but to concrete images of things and attributes in the artwork. The only possible ambiguity in Peikoff's remark that might mislead readers is the term "choosing." He is discussing selectivity in regard to subject—what to include in the subject of the artwork and what to omit. And by "subject," he means—and he states it clearly, as does Rand—the "objectification . . . the projection of a specific person . . . [i.e.] of fictional heroes like Howard Roark and John Galt." (OPAR, p. 420) So, an artist's "choosing the concretes he regards as best suited to his purpose," following this example, would involve acts like deciding whether to include a description of the color of Roark's hair or an account of Galt's undergraduate. Or, in a still-life—deciding whether to including any objects in the background, or what color to make the table, or whether to include any (seemingly) extraneous objects on the table. These are the kinds of concretes that Rand and Peikoff are talking about, when they discuss what is appropriate to include (or not) in the subject.

Nor is there any conflict between Rand's holding that the subject is the central, fundamental attribute of an artwork, and her view that the theme (abstract meaning) is the "integrator" or "link uniting . . . subject and style." Nor with her view that "all the elements . . . are involved in projecting an artist's view of existence." The basic task in artistic creation is

to fashion a microcosm which has images of objects or patterns that carry (or project or embody or bear—the synonyms are legion!) an abstract view of reality. As in language (i.e., propositional speech), before you can convey a style of expression in your symbol, before you can characterize the nature or actions of things in your symbol, you must do something more fundamental. You must first decide what you are going to characterize, what you are going to present in some manner or other, etc. Subject is central, for it is what exemplifies the abstract meaning of the artwork. Now, am I confusing subject with theme here? After all, the theme is “the summation of a novel’s abstract meaning” (Rand, “Basic Principles of Literature,” TRM, p. 81), and isn’t the theme conveyed by the manner or style in which the subject is handled? Yes and no. There is a crucial ambiguity here. The subject is what conveys the theme, and the style is how the theme is conveyed by the subject. For instance, one might say, “An image of implacable integrity was conveyed by Gary Cooper’s character in the movie version of “The Fountainhead.” Or, one might say, “An image of implacable integrity was conveyed by the manner in which the film editor of “The Fountainhead” excised any segments in which Gary Cooper’s character looked less than stolid and unflinching before the jury rendered its verdict.” Here we have an abstraction being conveyed both by the subject (or an element of it, the Howard Roark character) and by the style (the manner of film editing by essentials). (Caveat: this is just an illustration. I don’t know that either the acting or the editing was really that good!) Rand would never say, as Torres and Kamhi suggest, that the “nominal subject” corresponds to “the artist’s view of existence,” but rather that the actual subject of the artwork embodies it (again, feel free to substitute your favorite synonym). It is precisely the abstract meaning or “ultimate content” or theme of the artwork that corresponds to that view, and which is embodied by the artwork’s subject (not by the “nominal subject” from which the artist might have drawn the impulse or inspiration to fashion the artwork).

At any rate, this is my own reading of Rand, in which I fail to detect the inconsistencies that Torres and Kamhi claim to see. They suggest, for example, that these supposed contradictions explain instances in which Rand failed to grasp the real abstract meaning of certain paintings by Vermeer, one of her favorites. I would alternately suggest that her disappointment at the lack of heroic motifs in said paintings and her excitement over his style which she found so admirable combined to interfere with her ability to focus on what was embodied in Vermeer’s subjects. These factors may well have encouraged her mistaken judgment

that his subjects were banal and his style everything (relatively speaking). As strong as Rand's allegiance was to the idea of the centrality of the subject in esthetics, her real love obviously was for style. It's not unreasonable to suggest that she probably had an overly narrow view of what subject matter would be appropriate to the execution of a particular style. (Otherwise, why speak, as she did, of such apparent mismatches between subject and style as an "esthetic crime"?)

As for the allegedly special case of music, referred to in Kamhi and Torres' notes for the essay, I disagree with the claim they cite by L. A. Reid. He says that music does not have a subject or subject-matter and that, as Kamhi and Torres say, "what is represented" in music cannot be "conceptualized and verbalized apart from the representation itself." One widely discussed example to the contrary is that of the semblance of motion and goal-directedness in music. (See for instance Leonard B. Meyer's *Music, the Arts and Ideas*, The University of Chicago Press, 1968.) Using Reid's own schema: the primary subject-matter of such music is the existential instances of motion and goal-directed activity (shades of plot-based literature and drama!)—the secondary subject-matter is an array of music materials selected and transformed imaginatively by a composer because of their experienced or sensed appropriateness in presenting a semblance of such motion and activity—and the tertiary subject-matter is those fully organized musical materials as they present such a semblance (which in turn embodies the abstract view of a world in which values and goal-directed activity exist, which (along with their root: volition) Rand claims to be the essence of Romanticism in art).

It is sometimes claimed that the music of such pre-Romantic, even pre-Classical era composers as Bach or Vivaldi or Handel contains Romantic elements, that their music is passionate at times, reflecting the spirit thought by many to be confined to the wild and woolly 19th century. Indeed, with analytical tools such as those developed by Meyer, Schenker, and others, this claim can be shown to be more than just emotive opinionizing. I once did an analysis of a section of the courante movement of one of Bach's unaccompanied cello suites (a rather unlikely place to look for Romantic, goal-directed elements) and found a surprisingly rich musical "plot" unfolding within a fairly short span of time. Scarlatti and Monteverdi and Telemann do not have as many bells and whistles in their music as, say, Mozart or Hayden or, for that matter, Beethoven, Chopin, Shostakovich, etc. The structural hierarchies within which the goal-directedness in Baroque music works itself out are relatively "flat" (i.e., having fewer levels) compared to those in the music of later composers. In

this respect, the Romanticism (in Rand's sense of goal-directedness) in early music is more subtle and restrained. It took a great deal of "pushing the envelope" of stylistic boundaries before composers at last broke through into the obvious lush Romanticism that we most often associate with the term. I'm not trying to argue that Bach et al. were full-blown Romantics! All I'm saying here is that there is no Great Divide between music of the 1600s and 1700s on the one hand and music of the 1800s and 1900s on the other. Instead, there is a demonstrable continuum of gradually increasing amounts of goal-directedness in music during the Common Practice Era (aka, the Age of Tonal Music).

Much more needs to be said about music than I can reasonably attempt here (see my essay, "Thoughts on Musical Characterization and Plot: the Symbolic and Emotional Power of Dramatic Music," *Art Ideas*, June 1998). I hope it's clear, however, that a key element I see as missing from the Objectivist esthetics is the acknowledgement of an extensive, striking analogy between music and the literary arts. Rand said she was not able to understand how to develop a "clear conceptual distinction and separation of object from subject in the field of musical perception." I think the reason is that she saw the primary link between music and experience as the emotions, which instead is a derivative element in music—as in the other arts. The way to understand how music represents basic abstractions is to learn music theory and analysis and to carefully study what is happening in music, not to focus inwardly on whatever feelings you might be experiencing in regard to it. That latter way, as Rand rightly recognized, lies subjectivism. And fortunately for those of us who want equal status with the other arts for the objectivity of musical experience, much of the spade-work in developing techniques for uncovering "teleological" structure in music was (unknown to Rand) done over 25 years ago. (Again, see the work of Meyer.) In lieu of such a total revolution in esthetics, perhaps even now, although a great deal of music does not afford such an experience and abstract view of the world, it will not be gainsaid that a vast body of music written during the past 300+ years does do so. Not all literature is Romantic either, but that didn't stop Rand from establishing the outstanding value of the literature that is Romantic as an important cornerstone of her esthetics. I would strongly suggest that the time is past due to extend the same consideration to the realm of music. Doing so would be an enormous step forward in esthetics for three reasons. It would go a long way toward establishing the essential unity of the arts. It would take music out of the realm of quasi-mystical, emotive characterizations (e.g., music as "the language of the emotions") and allow it

to be illuminated by the better understood arts such as literature and painting. And it would significantly extend the application of Rand's esthetics of literature, thus reinforcing its credibility and fundamentality.

This last point is important. Some question whether Rand's ideas about the nature of literature are properly a part of the philosophy of art. Perhaps she is simply equating her personal esthetics with esthetics in general (and thus committing the Fallacy of the Frozen Abstraction, about which she wrote so cogently in "Collectivized Ethics," *The Virtue of Selfishness*). I think that such a view grossly sells Rand short. It is clear to me that she was really on to something, but that she just didn't take it nearly far enough. Using the volition premise as a differentia for classifying art as Romantic or Naturalistic is just one way to sort out the arts. But note that this premise is based on an aspect of the human conceptual faculty. Another aspect (and I suspect there are still others) that shows great potential for classifying art is the fact that the contents of our consciousness are hierarchical, i.e., structured in interconnected layers, following the principle of unit-economy. And there can be relatively deep (many-layered) or relative flat (few-layered) hierarchies—not to mention hierarchies on which a great deal too much has been heaped! Both literature and music—as well as architecture, sometimes included in the fine arts—exemplify this attribute to one degree or another. Setting aside the question of whether music exemplifies volitionality and goal-directedness, there is thus another highly important question as to the hierarchical structuring of the temporal arts (and architecture). In contrast, just consider the styles of 20th century music in which perceiving organized pattern is deliberately eschewed: no goal-directedness, no hierarchy—just chaos shading gradually into boredom (or irritation!).

The common thread running through both ways of looking at art works and genres is their being based on one of the main features of human consciousness. This ties in well with Rand's and Peikoff's point about art being concerned with teaching "a technique of directing one's awareness," about the fact that art "conditions or stylizes man's consciousness by conveying to him a certain way of looking at existence (OPAR, p. 423). A well-structured story or musical piece—apart from (or in addition to) whatever it may convey about human volitional mental functioning—certainly does draw the reader or listener into a process that conveys an important point about human hierarchical mental functioning. There is a strong presumption, in other words, that Rand has laid the groundwork for a Grand Unified Theory of Esthetics. Someday, I suggest, a methodology derived from her work will allow theorists to legitimately classify artworks

and connoisseurs to legitimately evaluate artworks as to how and/or whether they enhance one's experience of the volitional, hierarchical nature, etc., of one's consciousness. Far from Rand's well-argued personal preference for Romantic literature being merely an idiosyncratic intrusion into philosophy of art, I think it is reasonable to see it as the preface to a much deeper analysis and understanding of the nature and value of art. My disagreements with them over certain issues notwithstanding, I congratulate Lou and Michelle for their very stimulating essay. If it is any indication of the quality and provocative nature of their forthcoming book, *What Art Is* (Open Court, 1998), there should be some extremely interesting discussions of esthetics in Objectivist circles and (one hopes) academic circles, as well, in the next several years.

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