

CRITICISM OF VISUAL EXPRESSIONS: THE META-COGNITIVE PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction

It is possible to postulate that all humans are innately imbued with the intuition to distinguish the good from the bad. This rather essentialist postulation definitely may not wish to explore the philosophical theories of either ‘good’ or ‘bad’. Another seeming essentialist postulation, as I am wont to specifically state here, is that humans vary considerably in their ability to discern or distinguish colours and shapes of objects. This is because certain individuals may possess more experiences and express greater level of perception than others. That is why an object presented to ten different peoples in the street would probably elicit ten different and diverse responses. Their responses are based on four theories of judging objects: imitationalism, formalism, emotionalism and functionalism.

Criticism of visual expressions is a field of study in which hidden ideas, thoughts and events of the past, present and the future are discovered or revealed. It is a principle which is considered temporal to the untrained eyes and minds. Visual images are therefore looked upon with the mere knowledge of good and bad. Critics, historians and aestheticians of visual expressions have designed methods and theories to unravel the mystery underlying visual images. This is an attempt to make criticism of visual images or expressions a more precise and objective discipline. This paper considers what is known as meta-cognitive perspective in criticism. The paper answers such questions as: Who is the creator of these creative works? What is the relationship between the creator and the product? What transpires between the creative works and the observer, what collaborative force binds the creator, the creative work and the observer? The four theories mentioned above have also been discussed.

The Object

Visual expressions are ideas, feelings and values visually represented. These inventions or creations are special expressions in perceptible form. If something is perceptible, it means that we can perceive it. And to perceive means to be aware of things through our senses – seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling and touching. It also means to have the ability to recognize and understand things we experience in our environment. The visual creations are “Special expressions” as stated above because they effectively convey or communicate feelings and ideas in visual form. That means every work created or designed has a story in it. This story is hidden in the object. The process of revealing or discovering the meanings of the work is referred to as criticism.



Plate 1: Lu Duble, *Cain*, Hydrocal, 97x71x46cm, 1953.

Once a visual object or piece is presented, it stimulates different kinds of interpretations from different observers. Before looking at these different interpretations let us look at some opinions about criticism of visual expressions.

Katz, Lankford and Plank (50) proposed two basic approaches to criticism. They are intrinsic and contextual criticism. They define intrinsic as something “to come from within”. They say “Intrinsic criticism focuses on the properties or qualities of a work of art that exists *within* the work itself and the meanings that are derived from what confronts the senses.”

Intrinsic criticism does not consider any information that comes from outside the work. The most important thing here is to recognise the visual components that exist within the work, their expressiveness, and their relationship to one another, and how the work affects us. Contextual criticism, according to Katz, Lankford and Plank (54), “focus on understanding a work of art in relationship to personal, social, or historical information that cannot be gathered simply from observing the work of art itself.” They conclude that intrinsic encounter would continue to analyze only the information that could be seen and understood within the work of art itself. Contextual encounter, on the other hand, would go on to uncover information about the persons and events that might clarify aspects of the work that would not be perceived by simply looking at it.

To be able to achieve these approaches, Chapman (67-72) and Ragans (15) present four methods, - a step by step process of logical thinking. The four major steps involve describing what you see, analyzing relationships, interpreting meanings and judging.

In Step One, one describes what one sees. One takes time to look at the work, take inventory of the literal qualities or realistic qualities one sees in the work, and describe it in detail using facts, not opinions. In this step, one is a visual expression detective who gathers visual evidences or clues from all the following:

- Form, Medium, and Condition
- Dimensions
- Subject Matter
- Sensory Qualities (Colour, lines, shapes, textures, spaces etc)
- Technical Qualities (Materials, tools and techniques)

In Step Two one analyzes relationships and the evidence. In this step, there is closer observation of the similarities, differences or repeated patterns in what one has observed. A scrutiny of the most important features is witnessed and one makes use of the principles of design such as:

- Balance
- Rhythm, Movement
- Proportions
- Emphasis
- Pattern
- Unity and Variety
- Relationships in Subject Matter. This will give an understanding of the work's design qualities or how well the work is organized, or put together.

Step Three involves the interpretation of the evidence. In this step, a hypothesis (a good guess) about the meaning of the work is expressed. A good interpretation explains what one has observed and analyzed. This step is about using all our knowledge about visual expressions and life to interpret the work. A good interpretation includes expressive language and analogies which tell about causes and effects and explains how the work is related to other ideas or events. These processes will guide one towards better interpretation. Here one's concern should be to concentrate on identifying the expressive qualities, or the feeling, moods and ideas communicated to the viewer.

Step Four is about Judgement. A critical judgement can be made after one has interpreted a visual piece. Judging a visual piece is always a matter of being fair and logical. In judging a visual piece, the following is considered

- identifying the kind of visual piece one is judging
- stating one's purpose in making a judgement
- identifying the criteria or standards
- citing evidence (giving reasons) and
- stating one's conclusion.

These methods take into account different aesthetic qualities found in the visual work. These aesthetic qualities include: the literal, the design, and the expressive. They play important roles in the final criticism of visual expressions.

Aesthetic Qualities and Theories of Visual Expressions

The theories of Visual Expression state how people should think and judge visual expressions. The theories are: (i) expressions as imitation, (ii) as formal order, (iii) as expression and (iv) as functional. These four main theories help critics to think about the value of visual pieces or objects in a logical way during their discussions.

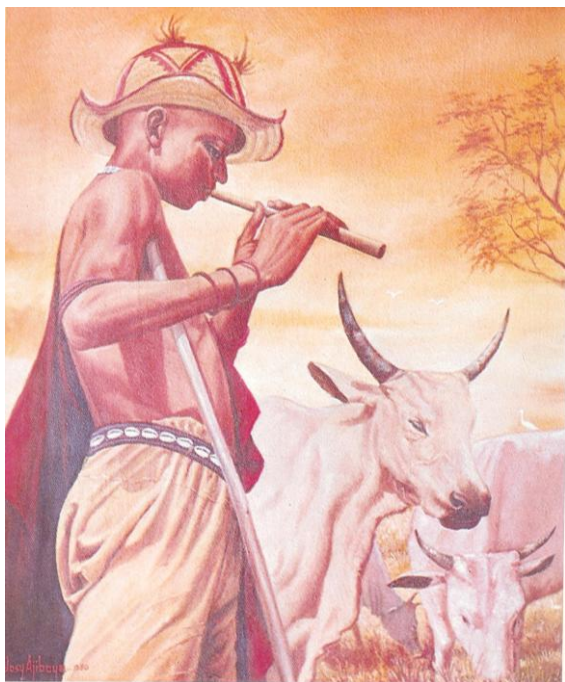


Plate 2: Ajiboye, J., Fulani shepherd boy with flute

Imitationalism and Literal Qualities

Some critics believe and feel that a visual image should imitate life; that it should look like what they have seen in the real world. They consider it successful when the work is the realistic representation of the subject matter. This theory is called imitationalism.

Formalism and Design Qualities



Plate 3: Felix Idubor, “Mother Africa”

Other critics view a work successful when it has effective arrangement of the elements of design according to the principles of design. They believe that colours, lines, textures, shapes, forms and values are arranged and organized properly in relation to the space in the work. This approach is called Formalism.

Emotionalism and Expressive Qualities

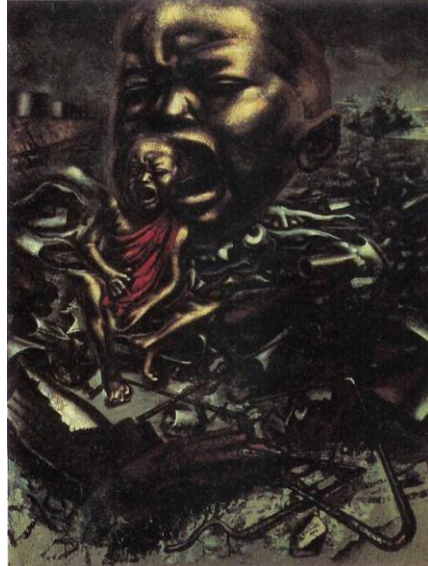


Plate 4: David Siqueiros, *Echo of a Scream*, Enamel on wood, 122x91cm, 1937

Critics in support of Emotionalism theory claim that an effective and successful visual image is one that has expressive qualities that could effectively communicate to the viewer. This theory is concerned with the feelings, moods, and emotions – the expressive qualities.

Functionalism and Expressive Qualities

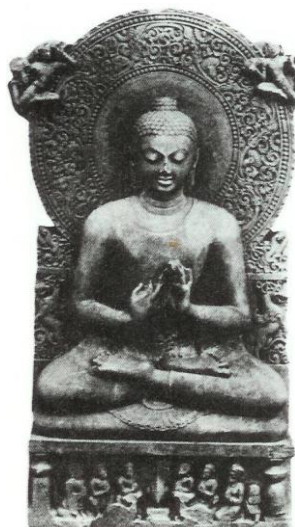


Plate 5: Seated Buddha, Stele, sandstone, 160cm high

Other critics feel that for a visual object to be considered successful that objects should be functional. They say when judging functional object, attention should be given to both beauty and usefulness. All these methods and theories are designed to reveal the hidden meaning of the visual images. The methods and theories are still at the level of experience and intellect. It is beyond these that the meta-cognitive aspect comes into play.

Criticism: The Meta-Cognitive Perspective

To the critic, historian and aesthician of visual creations (inventions) the above named methods and theories of visual images is the height of knowledge of criticism. There is just a little connection between the physical rendering of visual images and their meaning. There is much more to learn. If the visual images (objects) and visual theories are all that we can know, it follows that humans can be known only to the extent that they are visual or physical object (image) among visual or physical images or object.

Most people are well aware that before the advent of methods and theories of criticism of visual expressions, the mind of man started relating itself to the world around it in an entirely new ways. The method was observing facts of nature and systematically analysing and interpreting them in terms of physical cause and effect. This practice has been growing ever since. The issue now is, why do people not understand the visual expressionist (the artist) and his works?

The visual expressionist operates on three different planes. That is, the physical – the real or material world, the intellectual or mental or scientific level and the highest plane – the spiritual. This then means that there are also three classes of visual expressionists (artists). There are those that are earthbound – those who work on only what they see and or experienced. Those of the second class work with their intellect. They tend to find or discover new ways or techniques to their works. Most people could describe, analyse and interpret the works of the two classes of inventors (creators) based on their experiences. The third class of creators are those who operate at the spiritual level. The visual images of this class are not understood by every person because the works themselves are spiritual. Here lies the meta-cognition. This is because man is spiritual; the creator (artist) is more spiritual due to the creative ingenuity. His works are spiritual and in traditional societies he is next to the priest. How does this happen? The vibrations of the nerves and the spirit are transmitted to the work. The work absorbs the personality of the creator. This is what gives the image life. Scientifically, it was argued that humans consist of atoms. During the process of creation some of these atoms fell onto the creator's works thereby giving them life. Both spirituality and science postulate that energy from the creator entered into the object or image during production. For example, according to Ingalese (102):

Each person radiates from himself not only the physical atoms which he has used, and which have lost vibration, but also the finer forms of matter which go out with his thought force; and therefore there is a continuous stream flowing out from each individual to other centres, and these streams leave their impress upon everything the person thinks about or touches.

We can view art criticism and art appreciation in terms of the scientific understanding of “the magnetic field,” a “force field.” Certain scientific postulations would argue that this magnetic field vibrates at a certain level and enables a trained police detective dog to follow the scent of a human. As the human walks over the ground, some of the atoms or particles are thrown off from him. A certain quantity of these particles is left imprinted upon the earth; and

since every individualized consciousness possesses its own distinct odour or perfume, due to its rate of vibration, it is not at all difficult for the dog to keep the scent of the person he is following. Simple scientific experiment commonly observed in people today is finger prints. If one unconsciously touches an object, and the object is taken to the laboratory, it reveals the impressions of finger prints of that individual who touched the object. If this person had consciously held that object with much concentration, energy is infused into the object through the hands. When artworks are produced by individuals with higher consciousness, their works become incomprehensible. This is because, in such works there is attraction and repulsion due to the flow of life-force into them and the exchange of atoms which constantly take place.

Think about the works of Vincent Van Gogh whose works are sold for millions of dollars after many years of his death. He was higher than his world so they could neither fathom nor criticise his works. With the passing of time, an increasing consciousness enabled people to grasp the message of Van Gogh's works. People became attracted to his works and therefore, purchased them. I can argue, within this meta-cognitive theory of art criticism, that whenever an artist completes a work of art, the work becomes a force. The work possesses its own personality, its own force field (magnetic field). Therefore it has its connecting power to the rhythm of life. So we have the creator (who is the artist), the object and the viewer. If the viewer's force field is not at par with the magnetic flow of the creator (the artist), the work becomes repulsive to the viewer but where the viewer and the creator are at the same level, the viewer will be attracted to the work and can make constructive criticism. Again where the viewer's appreciation level is higher in frequency, the viewer makes greater input to improve the visual image. This relationship between the object, the creator and the viewer does not depend on academic intelligence.



**Plate: Marcel Duchamp, *Nude Descending a Staircase*
(work in abstraction)**

It was said that Albert Einstein, the great physicist, was invited to an exhibition, and was asked to appreciate the exhibits. Einstein could only decipher the works created in realistic senses but was not able to criticise works done in abstraction. Such experiences abound. It is therefore possible to uphold Kandinsky's (47) suggestion which argues for the artist to train not only his eyes but also his soul, so that both should be extended to the critic or viewer. When Einstein's experience is considered, both the viewer/critic and the work could have rapprochement at that higher level. The whole society needs personal development to be able to meet the demands of the inventors of visual expressions. Joseph Chilton Pearce argues that "we must accept that this creative pulse within us is God's creative pulse itself," while Mary Daly believes that "it is the creative potential itself in human beings that is the image of God." While Julia Cameron states that "Creativity is God's gift to us, using our creativity is our gift back to God," Julia Cameron says that "Creativity is the natural order of life, life is energy: pure creative energy." The above sayings, no doubt, are further assertions of the fact that a certain spiritual parallel exists between the creator and the creations.

Conclusion

The meta-cognitive perspective helps to broaden the scope of criticism. All the practitioners of this theory need personal development of body (physical), soul (the intellect) and the spirit. It is suggested in this paper that the other two classes of inventors: the earth bound i.e. who work on what they see and or experience as well as those of the intellectual class, should as a matter fact infuse into their works the energy generated in their bodies through thought forms, through focus – eyes and the touch with their hands. Any creative work that loses the touch (focus) of its creator has no life in it. The attractive power created by the creator from his atoms that are not energized make it near lifeless. Because any work kept unused and without a purpose (function) is dead. It becomes a mere matter (an object) except the natural motion in it. Any work separate from energy does not exist.

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