

Form and content revisited

Lars-Olof Åhlberg

O body swayed to music,
O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer
from the dance?

– W.B. Yeats

1. Introduction

Both the history of the concept of form as well as the linguistic background of the term »form« is interesting and complex. Raymond Williams, commenting on the uses of the word in the 14th and 15th century, notes that »form spanned the whole range from the external and superficial to the inherent and determining.¹ On the one hand »form« refers to »a visible or outward shape«, on the other hand it denotes »an essential shaping principle.² Both uses are prevalent in aesthetics. The following are some of the senses of the term »form« listed in *The Universal Dictionary of the English Language*: (1) Relative grouping of the parts of a thing; configuration, outline, contour, shape, figure, etc., (2) Method of arrangement, way in which parts of a whole are grouped or interrelated, (3) style, mode of expression, manner of presentation, artistic shape, (4) Particular mode of existence, for example form of government, art forms, (5) Type of life or structure, for example forms of animal and vegetable life, and (5) which is said to be the philosophical sense of the term, the intrinsic, essential, ideal character of a thing, the intrinsic, essential, ideal character of a thing, the collection of qualities, the internal constitution, which make a thing what it is.³

Both in and outside philosophy »form« has many different, though often related meanings. We can do things for form's sake, words can be different in form but identical in meaning, there are income tax forms to be filled in, the Vienna Philharmonic often play at the top of their form, a horse can be in good form, the Aristotelian formal cause of this conference is the problem of form, which makes it into a conference on form, and there are the Wittgensteinian forms of life we all participate in.

The concept of form is one of the most complicated concepts in the history of philosophy and in aesthetics and art criticism. In general philosophy this concept has had a rich and variegated history – from Aristotle's analyses of

1. R. Williams, *Keywords. A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, rev. ed., Fontana, London 1983, p. 138

2. *Ibid.*

3. »Form«, *The Universal Dictionary of the English Language*, ed. Henry C. Wyld, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1952, p. 446.

the relations between form and matter to the early Wittgenstein's search for the logical form of the sentence.

Form plays an important role in many different theoretical frameworks, critical ideologies and programmes in the aesthetic field. The ambiguous legacy of the concept, the many uses it has been put to, the difficulty of making it respectable by defining it once and for all and the unquestioned dualism that seems to be involved in it, are some of the factors that account for the scepticism if not the outright repudiation of the concept in much contemporary aesthetics. »/T/he concept of form, like those of expression and imitation /.../, is infinitely elastic« writes Francis Sparshott.⁴ The concept may not be infinitely stretchable, but it certainly has been employed in a great variety of meanings and contexts.

The dichotomy of form and content seems to be a good candidate for deconstructive treatment. While remaining sceptical of aesthetic theories in which form is the key concept and thinking that many confused ideas are often associated with it, I believe the concept, like so many other vague and loose concepts in this field, is useful and perhaps even necessary when analysing and trying to understand the arts and their function in the web of our culture.

The purpose of my paper is twofold. Firstly I want to discuss some influential analyses of the concept and the role of form in the arts. Secondly I wish to remark on the role »form« and its cognates has played in evaluating art.

One way of approaching the concept of form and its role in aesthetic discourse in general and in aesthetic theorizing in particular is to explore what form is contrasted with. This method of contrast, as we may call it, was recommended by William James in his Gifford Lectures, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1901-2) where he claims »that it always leads to a better understanding of a thing's significance to consider its exaggerations and perversions, its equivalents and substitutes and nearest relatives elsewhere.«⁵ There may not be any room for speaking about exaggerations or perversion as regards form, but it is certainly possible and fruitful to investigate the equivalents and substitutes of »form«.

Before discussing specific aesthetic uses of the concept I want to mention some dichotomies outside aesthetics where »form« and »normal« occur. Formal logic deals with valid forms of reasoning, with the structure of deductions and arguments and does not pronounce on the factual correctness of the premises, it does not deal with the »content« of an argument. Therefore formal logic can be contrasted with what may be called a logic of content, if there is one and the relationship between formal and dialectical logic has been a subject of heated controversies in the history of Marxism. Yet another contrast is the one

4. F. Sparshott, *The Theory of the Arts*, Princeton Univ. Press, Princeton 1982, p. 93.

5. W. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience. A Study in Human Nature*, The Gifford Lectures 1901-2, Fontana, London 1960, p. 42.

between formal and informal logic, the latter being regarded as an autonomous discipline.⁶ In other contexts the dichotomies will obviously be different. The opposite of formal dress is casual dress, not dialectical dress or dress with content. A formal request is contrasted with an informal and unofficial one, a formal visit with a private visit and so on.

2. Form in aesthetics

In aesthetics we encounter the following conceptual pairs: form/matter, form/subject-matter, form/materials, form/expression, form/emotion, form/representation, form/meaning, form/structure and form/content. Before discussing a few representative views on form and its role in art, I want to suggest that when using the term »form« and when theorizing about form we are easily misled by the metaphor that seems to underly the dichotomy of form and content. According to the picture that is suggested by an unsophisticated use of the contrast between form and content, form is like the shape of the container in which the content is to be found. If anyone doubts that metaphors can have a very powerful hold over our imagination and that they are capable of shaping and informing a philosophical tradition and its problems, let me just refer to the question of the existence of the external world, a problem that trades on the metaphorical contrast between the inner and the outer. In classical empiricist epistemology the mind and its collections of impressions and sense-data and what not, is the inner world and the problem then becomes to understand how the contents of the container can correspond to what is outside the container – the outer world.⁷

I do not claim that the metaphorical overtones of the terms »form« and »content« somehow make them useless or that the attempt to render them more precise through analysis and stipulations is futile. I just want to make the point that the metaphorical character of these terms adds to the difficulties. The term »form« easily leads to a static conception of the relationship between form and content, as if form were a mould into which a content has to be forced. There is, to be sure, a sense in which »forms« are static and can be said to express a theme and to have a content etc. Think of the sonata form or the sonnet for example. But in other contexts »form« is conceived of as a dynamic principle structuring all features in a work of art.

Form in a work of art is often said to be the way something is said or done, the content consisting of what is said in the work of art. The distinction here is between the how and the what. Sometimes this distinction can readily be

6. A survey of the field is given in Douglas N. Walton, *Informal Logic. A Handbook for Critical Argumentation*, Cambridge Univ. Press, Cambridge 1989.

7. In one of his lectures in 1930, Wittgenstein having granted that thinking sometimes may »involve images and these we think of as being 'in the mind« remarks that »This simile of 'inside' or 'outside' the mind is pernicious« (*Wittgenstein's Lectures, Cambridge 1930-2*, ed. Desmond Lee, Blackwell, Oxford 1980, p. 25).

applied, sometimes not. It makes sense to ask how two works sharing the same form, two sonnets or classical tragedies for example, differ in themes, plots etc. In other cases it is very difficult to see that the distinction between form and content makes sense. The formal devices in a classical symphony, for example, can be described in purely musical terms, but what could possibly be the content over and above these formal features? Also there are works of art where it is difficult, if not impossible, to speak of »form« at all, although the works in question may have a theme, express ideas and so on. I am thinking of some works of conceptual art which do not seem to have any physical or material features at all, at least not in any usual sense.

A notable feature of the term »form« is that it often is used evaluatively. It shares this feature with stylistic terms like »realism« or »expressionism« and aesthetic predicates like »graceful«, »sublime« or »tragic«. The evaluative use of »form« implies that we are unwilling to speak of »form« and »formal« features in a work of art if the work in question falls below certain standards, if the form and the formal features of the work aren't interesting enough. When new styles and modes of expression which repudiate traditional ways of writing, painting and composing enter the artworld, art critics who dislike the new developments or are shocked by them express their attitude by claiming the new art to be formless, disorganized, and incomprehensible. They may even say that the new revolutionary art isn't art at all.

When saying that »form« can be used and is used evaluatively I am of course relying on a distinction between the evaluative or normative and the descriptive. There is, however, no agreement as to how this distinction should be drawn and there is no generally accepted theory of the meaning and function of value judgments. We may even suspect that the distinction itself rests on questionable assumptions which are however difficult to unearth.⁸ I am not altogether happy with this distinction so it is with some reluctance I invoke it here. Even if no theory satisfactorily accounts for the differences (and the similarities) between description and evaluation it is not so difficult in practice, I think, to apply this distinction. It is easier to reach agreement on what kinds of statements are to be counted as evaluative and normative than to agree on a theory which explains the distinction between description and valuation.

It is instructive to consider Hegel's use of the form-content dichotomy from this point of view. A pervasive theme in Hegel's aesthetics is the unity of form and content. In *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften* (1817) we

8. Hilary Putnam has pointed out that the discussion »whether values are 'objective' or 'subjective' [...] is still trapped in the categories fixed by Hume« (H. Putnam, »After Empiricism«, in *Post-Analytic Philosophy*, eds. J. Rajchman & C. West, Columbia Univ. Press, New York 1985, p. 29). This issue is closely bound up with the discussion of the distinction between the descriptive and the evaluative, between facts and norms.

find an illustration of the inseparability of form and content taken from the field of art. He speaks of books that lack form because they are clumsily written, but they don't lack form altogether though, what they lack is an adequate form and he goes on to say that this correct or adequate form (»Diese rechte Form«) »ist so wenig gegen den Inhalt gleichgültig, dass diese vielmehr der Inhalt selbst ist. Ein Kunstwerk, welchem die rechte Form fehlt, ist eben darum kein rechtes. d.h. kein wahres Kunstwerk«. ⁹ In true works of art form and content are identical he claims. In fact the identity of form and content occurs not only in art according to Hegel, this identity is in all fields of human endeavour the precondition of truth and solidity. In the introduction to his *Ästhetik* (1835) Hegel states that in valid art the spiritual and the sensuous form a unity, and this is the reason why he doubts and sometimes even seems to deny that music is an art form at all. ¹⁰ In any case music lacks, according to Hegel, a determinate content and in so far as it is art it has little value in his eyes.

The form-content dichotomy and the unity of form and content has a similar evaluative function in the Marxified Hegelianism of Lukács. In his *Ästhetik* (1963) he claims that

die Wirkung des Werks /.../ führt die ästhetisch gereinigten und ästhetisch homogen gemachten Lebensinhalte zur Formvollendung, zur Identität von Inhalt und Form, zur Ausgipfelung des Inhalts in die konkrete Form des Werks; jene leitet mit Hilfe der das Formsystm unterbauenden und ermöglichenden homogenen Mediums dem Rezeptiven in die Welt des Werks: die Form schlägt hier in Inhalt um. ¹¹

The last sentence in this quotation is taken almost verbatim from Hegel. ¹² Nevertheless Hegel has to be turned upside down materialistically as Lukács puts it in his essay »Kunst und objektive Wahrheit« (1954) and form as well as content have to be interpreted as reflections of reality, not as abstract principles or spiritual processes. ¹³ To turn Hegel upside down, to rescue the rational kernel, the dialectical method, is an undertaking more demanding than Lukács ever realized. In any case such an undertaking presupposes that form and content can at least in some cases be separated and that a philosophical method can be isolated from its applications and its results. It

9. G. W. F. Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften* 1, *Die Wissenschaft der Logik*, Werke 8, Hrsg. Eva Moldenhauer & Karl Markus Michel, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/Main 1970, p. 266.

10. G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik* 1, Werke 13, p. 62; *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik* 3, Werke 15, 148-9. Werke 15, p. 148-9.

11. G. Lukács, *Ästhetik, Die Eigenart des Ästhetischen*, 1, Werke 11, Luchterhand, Neuwied 1963, p. 803.

12. G. W. F. Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften*, 1, p. 265.

13. G. Lukács, »Kunst und objektive Wahrheit«, in *Probleme des Realismus 1, Essays über Realismus*, Werke 4, Luchterhand, Neuwied 1971, p. 626.

seems to me that this is often quite impossible to achieve. Could Plato's philosophy have been expressed *modo geometrico*, could Heidegger's meditations on the essence of language have been expressed in the semantics of Carnap, could Russell's views on our knowledge of the external world have been expressed in the form of philosophical remarks and jokes?

It seems to me that the principle of the unity of form and content and the dialectical relationship between them, for Hegel and Lukács, function as evaluative principles. Failing to show, or not feeling the need to show, what these principles amount to in practice, in the analysis of concrete works of art, they remain obscure. It would have been nice to know how form and content can be identical and at the same time transformed into one another in for example *Hamlet*.

The conceptual opposition between form and content cannot be applied to all art forms and to all individual works of art in the same manner. »Form« and »formal elements« may well mean very different things when applied to different art forms and the distinction between form and content could differ in function and purpose depending on whether we think of literature, painting or music. Too much aesthetic theorizing assumes, consciously or unconsciously, that what applies to one art form applies to all art forms. The belief that the key concepts in aesthetics have a constant meaning regardless of which art form they are applied to is the semantic counterpart of this attitude.

Susanne K. Langer warned us more than thirty years ago against the temptation to overgeneralize. She pointed out that

/w/hen we talk about »Art« with a capital »A« – that is, about any or all of the arts: painting, sculpture, architecture, the potter's and goldsmith's and other designers' arts, music, dance, poetry, and prose fiction, drama and film – it is a constant temptation to say things about »Art« in this general sense that are true only in one special domain, or to assume that what holds for one art must hold for another.¹⁴

Langer herself may be accused of succumbing to this temptation when she developed her own theory of art as »the creation of forms symbolic of human feeling«.¹⁵ Her theory was originally conceived as a theory of significance in music and then expanded to cover all the art forms. Her view that music – through its dynamic forms – reveals the hidden structure of human feeling and is expressive of the dynamic nature of sentient life is the most interesting and plausible part of her philosophy of art.¹⁶

14. S. K. Langer, *Problems of Art. Ten Philosophical Lectures*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1957, p. 13.

15. S. K. Langer, *Feeling and Form. A Theory of Art Developed From »Philosophy in a New Key«*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York 1953, p. 40.

16. See S. K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key. A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art*, (1942) 3rd. ed., Harvard Univ. Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1974.

Be that as it may, in order to avoid empty and uninformative generalizations it is prudent to follow Langer's advice, if not her practice. Therefore I shall now discuss a few representative views on form in literature, painting and music respectively, before discussing form as an artistic value.

2.1 Form in literature

René Wellek and Austin Warren write in their classic *Theory of Literature* (1949) that the terms »form« and »content« are »terms used in too widely different senses for them to be /.../ helpful; indeed, even after careful definition, they too simply dichotomize the work of art«. ¹⁷ They propose to replace them by the terms »materials« and »structure«. These latter terms, however, are not regarded by them as »a simple renaming of the old pair, content and form«. ¹⁸ »Materials« stand for »aesthetically indifferent elements« while »structure« includes »both content and form so far as they are organized for aesthetic purposes«. ¹⁹ It is difficult to see that this view is an improvement because the terms »form« and »content« themselves can certainly be given the meaning Wellek and Warren attach to »materials« and »structure«. Moreover the terms »materials« and »structure« are no less ambiguous and problematic than the original pair »form« and »content«. Wellek's and Warren's discussion of form and content illustrate the point made by Arnold Isenberg, in an article written in 1944, that everybody is dissatisfied with the distinction between form and content, but that nobody is happy to dispense with it. ²⁰ Isenberg's point was probably truer at the time he made it than it is today, but it certainly applies to Wellek and Warren, because in *Theory of Literature* they also use »form« to refer to »the aesthetic structure of a literary work – that which makes it literature«. ²¹ Furthermore they claim that form organizes matter and that »/i/n a succesful work of art, the materials are completely assimilated into the form«. ²²

The concept of structure introduced earlier is absent and their view of the relationship between form and content appears to be the traditional one, namely that a work of art is formed content.

In one of the passages quoted from Wellek and Warren, they try to explain »form« in terms of »structure«. This is not an unusual procedure. In Cuddon's *A Dictionary of Literary Terms* (1979), for example, under the entry »form« it is asserted that »/w/hen we speak of the form of a literary work we refer to

17. R. Wellek & A. Warren, *Theory of Literature*, (1949), 3rd ed., Penguin, Harmondsworth 1963, p. 28.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 141.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 140-1.

20. A. Isenberg, »Perception, Meaning, and the Subject Matter of Art« (1944) in A. Isenberg, *Aesthetics and the Theory of Criticism. Selected Essays*, ed. William Callaghan et. al., Univ. of Chicago Press, Chicago 1973, p. 36.

21. Wellek & Warren, p. 241.

22. *Ibid.*

its shape and structure /.../ as opposed to its substance or what it is about«. ²³ Although »f/orm and substance are inseparable« according to the same source, »they may be analysed and assessed separately«. ²⁴ Clearly there are problems with this view. How two elements that are inseparable can be analysed and assessed separately is left in the dark. And in Roger Fowler's *A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms* (1987) Allan Rodway contrast »form« with »'paraphrasable content'«, »the way something is said in contrast to what is said«. ²⁵ And for good measure he adds that »even though form and content may be inseparable for the 'full meaning' of a work, the paraphrasable content may nevertheless be used to enable the concept of form to be discussed«. ²⁶ He further claims that »form must /my italics/ be either structural or textural, the one being large-scale, a matter of arrangement, the other small-scale, a matter of impressionism«. ²⁷ Again it is far from clear why form must be of only two kinds and what »structure« means here.

A different view of the relationship between form and structure in literature is advanced by Anne Sheppard in her book *Aesthetics. An Introduction to the Philosophy of Art* (1987). She notes that »the range of features which count as 'formal' is exceedingly wide« ²⁸ and instead of trying to give a general definition of form and formal features she proceeds to give examples of formal features in different literary genres. The metre used for verse is one example, the interweaving of plot and sub-plots in certain novels is another. »Despite the diversity of what counts as 'formal'«, she says, »there is one thing which all these examples have in common: in every case relationships between features are involved«, adding that »in every case it is the ordering of the formal features which matters«. ²⁹

However, there are many things outside the field of art where »relationships between features are involved« and there are works of art where no relationships of this kind seem to be involved. Think of Walter de Maria's *Vertical Earth Kilometer* (1977) in Kassel, which is literally in the earth and cannot be seen or of Robert Barry's »works« which consist of pure thought, like the piece *All the things I know of which I am not at the moment thinking - 1:36 P.M.; 15 June 1969, New York* (1969). These are of course extreme examples and it could be denied that they are works of art because there is no

23. J. A. Cuddon, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*, rev. ed., Penguin, Harmondsworth 1982, p. 277.

24. *Ibid.*

25. Allan Rodway, »Form«, in R. Fowler, ed. *A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms*, rev. & enl. ed., Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1987, p. 99.

26. *Ibid.*

27. *Ibid.*

28. A. Sheppard, *Aesthetics. An Introduction to the Philosophy of Art*, Oxford Univ. Press, Oxford 1987, p. 39.

29. *Ibid.*

art object at all.³⁰ Nevertheless, whatever we may think of the value of conceptual art as art, it presents a conceptual challenge to our discourse about art. Moreover conceptual art was, in the words of one commentator, »probably /.../ the largest, quickest-growing and most genuinely international of all twentieth-century art movements«.³¹

2.2 Form in painting

There are no doubt various formalist positions in the aesthetics of painting. Many discussions of form and formalism in painting in Anglosaxon aesthetics take their starting point in the writings of the English formalist critics and theorists, Roger Fry and Clive Bell. In 1910 and 1912 Fry organized two important exhibitions of what he called the »post-impressionist« painters, which he distinguished from neo-impressionists like Seurat and Signac. In Fry's terminology Cézanne, Gauguin, Van Gogh and Matisse were post-impressionists and their works dominated the first exhibition. Fry's exhibition caused a scandal, but can still be said to have been a great success. Fry's influence on artistic taste in Britain was considerable, he exerted in the words of Harold Osborne, »a revolutionary influence on the taste of his day«.³²

Now both Fry and Bell employed an informal method of formalist analysis of painting and were at the same time the champions of a new taste in painting. Fry claimed that what matters in the art of painting are the plastic values, line, colouring and the relations between them. He distinguished between two kinds of painting, »real« painting where the plastic values dominate and representational painting where design and the plastic values primarily serve illustrative and non-artistic purposes. Matisse belongs to the former group and Rembrandt, whom Fry regarded as a great psychologist, to the second. The

30. Ben Tilghman denies that Barry's »work« is a work of art on these grounds. His main point is not that it lacks many of the properties works of art normally has, but, he says, taking away the art object itself and leave only the idea (whatever that means) may be going too far. If it is going too far, it is not merely because there are too few properties in common with the paradigm, but because what has been stripped away are all those things that seem to give point to calling something a work of art, such things as beauty, a celebration of some aspect of our life, a view of the world, and so on (B. Tilghman, *But Is It Art? The Value of Art and The Temptation of Theory*, Blackwell, Oxford 1984, p. 91). I think the issue here is partly normative and partly descriptive. While agreeing with Tilghman that the things he mentions make art valuable, it can be objected that Barry's work and similar conceptual works are a celebration of some aspect of life and that they indeed express a view of the world. If we are not willing to call these »works« art, what are they then? Tilghman seems to think that it is a misuse of language to call them art, but conceptual art certainly belongs to the art world and is treated by many as art. We seem to be faced with the choice between calling them non-art because they cannot fulfil some of the functions we expect art to fulfil or we can accept them as works of art and deny that they are very interesting or valuable.

31. Roberta Smith, »Conceptual Art« in *Concepts of Modern Art*, rev. & enl. ed., ed. Nikos Stangos, Thames and Hudson, London 1981, p. 262.

32. H. Osborne, »Fry, Roger«, in *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Art*, ed. H. Osborne, Oxford Univ. Press, Oxford 1981, p. 208.

normative nature of Fry's distinction is obvious. Fry may have thought that this distinction was based on a sound descriptive theory of what painting really is, in fact he showed the public of his day how to approach works of art they found utterly formless, disorganized, and even perverse. Instead of discovering the real nature of the art of painting, Fry and his follower Bell, introduced new criteria for the appreciation of painting. The following quotation from Fry bears out this point:

/.../ I venture to say that no one who has a real understanding of the art of painting attaches any importance to what we call the subject of a picture – what is represented. To one who feels the language of pictorial form all depends on how it is represented, nothing on what. Rembrandt expressed his profoundest feelings just as well when he painted a carcass hanging up in a butcher's shop as when he painted the Crucifixion or his mistress. Cézanne who most of us believe to be the greatest artist of modern times expressed some of his grandest conceptions in pictures of fruit and crockery on a common kitchen table.³³

And Bell, who distinguished between »descriptive painting« and »pure painting«, claimed that »a realistic form may be as significant, in its place as part of the design, as an abstract«, adding that »if a representative form has value, it is as form, not as representation. The representative element in a work of art may or may not be harmful; always it is irrelevant«.³⁴

It is clear that both Fry and Bell thought that a precondition of a real understanding of painting is that no importance is attached to the subject-matter of the painting. The artistic value of a painting, they believed, is decided solely by the formal qualities and relations present in the painting. In the words of Isenberg, they thought that »it is not important that a work of art should have an important subject«.³⁵ So artistic value and artistic greatness in no way depends on the importance or relevance of the subject-matter or the theme of the work. Instead of speaking here of »subject-matter« I prefer to speak of »thematic properties«. The phrase is borrowed from Ian Jarvie *Philosophy of the Film* (1987) where the thematic properties are properties that »look past the form of the work /.../ to the subject matter or, rather, to what it says about the subject matter«.³⁶ Jarvie here assumes that a work of art can say something about its subject matter, and he adds that »the question arises, is what /the artist/ is saying: true or false, good or evil, banal or

33. R. Fry, *The Artist and Psycho-Analysis*, The Hogarth Press, London 1924, p. 16

34. C. Bell, »The Aesthetic Hypothesis«, in C. Bell, *Art* (1913), Doubleday, New York 1958, p. 27.

35. A. Isenberg, »Formalism«, (1955) in A. Isenberg, *Aesthetics and the Theory of Criticism. Selected Essays*, p. 28.

36. I. Jarvie, *Philosophy of the Film. Epistemology, Ontology, Aesthetics*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, New York 1987, p. 182.

profound?«. ³⁷ While accepting the idea that a work of art can say something and that truth is involved in some oblique and obscure way, I don't think it is easy in any particular case to say what a work of art says or suggests.

What do Fry's and Bell's statements about the irrelevance of the thematic properties of a work of art imply in a particular case? Let's consider a few examples. Delacroix' famous painting *Liberty Leading the People* (1830) has been described as »a document of the intimate union of revolution and Romanticism« and as conveying »more powerfully than any other early nineteenth-century painting the political temper of revolutionary Europe«. ³⁸ If we accept the description of this work as »an allegory of revolution itself« ³⁹ the revolution as well as Delacroix' attitude are thematic properties of the work. When judging the artistic value of the work it is surely impossible not to be influenced by the thematic properties of the work. Or consider Picasso's *Guernica* (1937). An integral feature of the work is that it refers to the bombing of Guernica during the Spanish civil war and that it is an expression of Picasso's attitude towards that event. Consider finally the Soviet painter Gerasimov's portrait of Stalin at the funeral of a fellow revolutionary whose death more than likely had been precipitated by the subject of the painting himself. It would be strange, if not perverse, to try disregard the thematic properties of this work. Our attitude to Stalin certainly affects our judgement of the painting.

The view that the thematic properties of a work are irrelevant to its artistic value is very narrow and completely overlooks that relevance to human concerns is a legitimate source of artistic value.

The formalist perspective presupposes that we can isolate the formal features in a painting and judge them for themselves. That this approach involves great difficulties is inadvertently admitted by Bell when he says that »significant form« includes »combinations of lines and of colours« on the grounds that »/t/he distinction between form and colour is an unreal one« because we »cannot conceive a colourless line or a colourless space«. ⁴⁰ Similarly there are not two separate things, form and representative content or expression, but one configuration with properties of different kinds that can be separated only in analysis. This view, which to me seems to be correct, is well expressed by Gene Blocker: »Just as you cannot separate experience of things that are organized from their organization, so you cannot separate form from representational and expressive elements organized in a work of art.« ⁴¹ And

37. *Ibid.*

38. *Gardner's Art Through the Ages*, 6th ed., rev. by Horst de la Croix & Richard Tansey, Harcourt, Brace & Jovanovich, New York 1975, p. 675.

39. *Ibid.*

40. Bell, p. 19.

41. G. Blocker, *Philosophy of Art*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York 1979, p. 145.

he adds that »this organized whole is precisely what we mean, or ought to mean, by the »form« of a work of art«. ⁴² I don't think this is the only thing that ought to be meant by »form« and I would also like to add a consideration that is lacking in Blocker's discussion. It is often assumed that it is easy to pinpoint the formal properties or elements in a work of art. In fact there is no agreement as to what counts as a formal element, moreover what is a formal element from one perspective and in one analysis may not be a formal element when seen from a different perspective.

The structuralist attempt to find and define the elements of meaning, the »atoms« of meaning as it were, in the arts and their subsequent failure to do so, should make us see that there are no elements in an absolute sense. In other words what we regard as an element is subject to change and dependent on our theoretical and practical interests. To overlook this leads to bad theorizing and to boring criticism.

Contrary to Fry's contention understanding a representational painting presupposes that we attach importance to the subject-matter, simply because subject-matter and thematic properties are integral to the work. Roger Scruton is entirely right in saying that »the very suggestion that one could understand Rembrandt's Nightwatch, for example, while being indifferent to, or ignorant of, its representational status is absurd«. ⁴³ I suppose Scruton refers to Fry and Bell when he adds that »/t/he suggestion has, of course been made, since every conceivable absurdity has at one time or another been entertained in the theory of art«. ⁴⁴ A formalist could retort that if Rembrandt's painting cannot be seen as a pure formal configuration, this only shows that Rembrandt's work is an illustration and not a work of art. Such an argument is very unconvincing, it only betrays the normative character of the formalist definition of art as significant form.

2.3 Form and music

»/O/f all the arts music is the one where formal features are most clearly dominant« writes Anne Sheppard ⁴⁵ and even those who are not formalists in regard to literature or painting have often espoused a formalist view of music. Eduard Hanslick's *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen* (1854) remains to this day one of the most influential and consistent formulations of the formalist position. According to Hanslick music, that is instrumental music, is incapable of expressing any specific emotions or feelings. Moreover music cannot represent anything outside itself, because it lacks conceptual and linguistic powers. »The content of music is tonally moving forms« is the major thesis of Hanslick's

42. *Ibid.*

43. R. Scruton, *Art and Imagination. A Study in the Philosophy of Mind*, Methuen, London 1974, p. 210.

44. *Ibid.*

45. Sheppard, p. 42.

treatise.⁴⁶ Music as an art is akin to architecture and dancing, because they also lack any content apart from formal relationships.⁴⁷ It may be strange to say that the formal features in a work of art is the content, as if we never could talk about forms without content. However Hanslick insists that »/t/he concepts of content and form mutually determine and complement each other«,⁴⁸ and he furthermore thinks that music in contrast to literature and the visual arts »possesses form and content inseparably« whereas the latter art forms »can represent /.../ thoughts and events in a variety of forms«. ⁴⁹ He mentions the story of Wilhelm Tell which figures as the theme in novels, dramas and epic poems. If music cannot represent any particular events or particular feelings and emotions, it can nevertheless according to Hanslick represent and suggest the dynamic features of feelings. These dynamic features can be represented in virtue of similarities in formal patterns between the dynamics of feelings and the dynamics of music.

Susanne K. Langer's philosophy of music is in some ways a development of Hanslick's point. For she claims that music is »formulation and representation of emotions, moods, mental tensions and resolutions – a 'logical picture' of sentient, responsive life, a source of insight«. ⁵⁰ The function of music is cognitive, but the insights musical forms can impart cannot be formulated or named. Some things can be known which cannot be named, she says, and »music articulates forms which language cannot set forth«. ⁵¹ Langer's theory goes far beyond Hanslick's formalism, but her analysis can still be regarded as a variety of formalism, »formalism with an explicitly expressionist basis« as Sheppard puts it. ⁵²

I think Langer's semi-formalist view has its attractions. It is certainly possible to listen to instrumental music as if it were a musical analogue to our emotional life and I suggest it is much better to think about music in this way and to listen to it in this spirit than to assume that music has magical powers of representing non-musical reality, be it concrete things and events or the essence of reality. Musical forms can »correspond« to our experience and our emotions in a variety of ways, a fact which may account for the conviction that music can impart knowledge about reality.

Forms can, however, be significant and expressive without signifying or expressing anything in particular. Some people reject all formalist analysis of

46. E. Hanslick, *On The Musically Beautiful. A Contribution Towards the Revision of the Aesthetics of Music*, 8th ed. (1891), transl. Geoffrey Payzant, Hackett, Indianapolis, Indiana 1986, p. 29.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 78

48. *Ibid.*, p. 80.

49. *Ibid.*

50. S. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, p. 222.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 233.

52. Sheppard, p. 49.

»the meaning of music« because they feel that when the cognitive function of music is being denied, its importance and significance goes over board as well. Also there is widespread feeling that in order for music to be expressive it must express some definite feeling, mood or emotion. There is however an intransitive use of »expression« and »express« which does not require an object and this intransitive use of these expression is important in aesthetics.⁵³

The failure to understand the intransitive expressiveness of music is responsible for many mistaken ascriptions of content to particular musical works. Consider for example the following description of Liszt's *Ballade in B minor*: »It is less passionate and more full-blooded /than the ballades of Chopin/; concerned, as it were, less with personal suffering than with great happenings on the epical scale, barbarian invasions, cities in flames – tragedies of public more than private, import«. ⁵⁴ These words were written by the English eccentric Sacheverell Sitwell, but similar nonsense abound in the writings of more sober musicologists.

In contrast to Sitwell, who obviously thought that instrumental music can describe and suggest real world happenings, Deryck Cooke in his book *The Language of Music* (1959) thought that musical forms express definite feelings and attitudes. He thinks for example that the minor third »in the 1-3-5 progression /is/ expressive of an outgoing feeling of pain – an assertion of sorrow, a complaint, a protest against misfortune«. ⁵⁵ Cooke tries to reconstruct the vocabulary of musical forms, assigning a specific meaning to every form in isolation as if the musical forms had an inherent meaning to be discovered by analysis. The formal features like intervals, chords, harmonies, rhythmic patterns etc. can of course be described in expressive terms and the expressive vocabulary is perhaps the only vocabulary we can use when

53. For the intransitive sense of »expression«, see Scruton, ch. 14. The concept of intransitive knowledge and its role in aesthetics is developed by Kjell S. Johannessen in his contributions to *Culture, Language and Artificial Intelligence*, eds. M. Florin & B. Göranson, Berlin, Springer 1989 and to *Essays in Pragmatic Philosophy*, vol. 2, eds. H. Höibraaten & I. Gullvåg, Universitetsforlaget, Bergen 1990.

54. S. Sitwell, *Liszt*, (1955) Dover, New York 1967, p. 193.

55. D. Cooke, *The Language of Music*, Oxford Univ. Press, London 1959, p. 122. For a more extravagant reconstruction of a musical vocabulary consider the programme for Chopin's *Prélude No 9 in E minor*, written by Hans von Bülow (he wrote programmes for all the *Préludes*). Here Chopin has the conviction that he has lost his power of expression. With the determination to discover whether his brain can still originate ideas, he strikes his head with a hammer (here the sixteenths and thirty-seconds are to be carried out in exact time, indicating a double stroke of the hammer). In the third and fourth measure one can hear the blood trickle (trills in the left hand). He is desperate at finding no inspiration (sixth measure); he strikes again with the hammer and with greater force (thirty-second notes twice in succession during the crescendo). In the key of A flat he finds his powers again. Appeased, he seeks his former key and closes contentedly. (Quoted from Harold C. Schonberg, *The Great Pianists from Mozart to the Present*, Simon & Schuster, New York 1963, p. 129). It is remarkable that one of the leading musicians of the second-half of the nineteenth century, the pupil of Liszt and Wagner, the pianist and famous conductor von Bülow could write things like that.

describing our reactions to music. But it does not follow that musical forms as such have a definite, statable meaning.

The expressive properties we ascribe to a piece of music apply to the general character of the piece, not to any particular, isolated formal features. To describe Liszt's *Ballade* as happy and gay would betray a misunderstanding of the piece; to say that is dramatic, tense, wild, feverish and excited would be more to the point and it is this impression Sitwell wants to get across with his fanciful and absurd description.

Consider the expressiveness of a human face which is in some ways is to expressiveness in music. Expressiveness in a human face depends on a great variety of imperceptible and in themselves inexpressive features, like eye-movements, posture of the head and so on. Similarly, the expressiveness of a passage in music is dependent on a number of factors which in themselves may be inexpressive. When »the air of majesty« of the first themes in a Bruckner symphony is thought to depend on the fact that they »are clearly defined in harmony and /that they/ are usually based on fifths or octaves«⁵⁶ this cannot be the whole truth. This claim is sensible only if we presuppose a certain orchestration, a definite volume, a particular rhythmic pattern and tempo, a musical context, in other words the context provided by Bruckner's score itself. For imagine one of these Brucknerian themes being played on a flute accompanied by a tuba, or imagine them being played piano pianissimo or prestissimo and the air of majesty vanishes into thin air. The total expressive effect of a work depends on the total relationships of the formal features and it is a fruitless task to assign meanings – expressive or descriptive – to single forms and isolated passages. The expressiveness of a certain passage depends on many factors, no isolated formal features are expressive just by themselves.

2.4 Form and artistic value

Many formalists not only think that the formal features of a work are responsible for its status as an art work, its art-making features, they also tend to believe that formal features are the source of artistic and aesthetic value. A non-formalist need not of course deny that there are formal values and that they contribute to the overall artistic value of a work. A non-formalist can even admit that in some works of art formal features and formal values dominate at the expense of all other artistic values.

John Hospers, who is certainly no formalist, distinguishes between three kinds of values that are important in art, sensuous values pertaining to the texture, colours and shapes, formal values which have to do with the overall organization of a work of art, and what he calls life values. While sensuous and formal values in Hospers' view are mediumistic in the sense that »they are

56. H. Ulrich & P. Pisk, *A History of Music and Musical Style*, Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, New York 1963, p. 551.

concerned with what the work of art contains in its very medium« the life values he says »are not contained in the medium but are conveyed through the medium«. ⁵⁷ Hospers expresses these distinctions in a rather mechanistic way and the idea that some things are contained in the medium and others conveyed through the medium is questionable. Nevertheless his distinctions are, I think valid. Hospers introduces these three kinds of values under the heading »aspects of works of art«. There are, however, many more aspects of a work of art and several other dimensions of value than the ones discussed by Hospers.

Göran Hermerén distinguishes between no less than five different components or criteria of artistic value. These components are (1) skill and craftsmanship, (2) aesthetic value, (3) communication of feeling, (4) relevance and (5) originality. ⁵⁸ I will comment on the notion of aesthetic value and its relation to artistic value and say something about the notion of relevance involved here, but let me just add that treating artistic value in this way enables us to understand how works with entirely different characteristics, purposes and origins can possess artistic value. Some works possess all these features, others have several of them and there are works of art which possess only one of them. Some avant garde works which lack a perceptible surface cannot have aesthetic value in the sense under discussion. If we dislike them and think them pointless they have little or no relevance but they could still be artistically valuable in virtue of their originality and there are people who think that originality is the supreme artistic value which makes up for much. If the concept of art is primarily a normative concept, as I believe it is, the possession of at least one of these values is a necessary condition for being an art work.

»The aesthetic value of a work depends«, according to Hermerén, »on the way the surface of that work looks or appears: the way the work is composed, how colors and shapes are distributed on the canvas – and analogously in the other arts«. ⁵⁹ The term »aesthetic value« has certainly been used in a variety of ways and it is not uncommon to give it a wider application than Hermerén does. »Aesthetic value« is sometimes used as a synonym for »artistic value«, but it is sensible and desirable to distinguish between the two. When we speak of the aesthetic value of something, not necessarily an art work, we consider says Hermerén »the 'sensuous' and the 'structural' properties of X, including its expressive emotional qualities: its unity, complexity, balance, and harmony as well as its sadness, joyfulness, happiness, melancholy, or monumentality«. ⁶⁰ What Hermerén counts as »aesthetic values« is a mixed bag and it is

57. J. Hospers, »Aesthetics, Problems of«, in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol 1, ed. Paul Edwards, Macmillan, New York 1967, p. 44.

58. G. Hermerén, *Aspects of Aesthetics*, Gleerups, Lund 1983, pp. 62-73.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 64-5.

problematic to treat the sensuous and the structural properties as well as the expressive qualities of a work of art as being of the same kind, viz. as aesthetic. Some of the properties on Hermerén's list are properties that have been called »formal«. Both the sensuous and the structural properties could be regarded as formal properties of a work of art and it is in fact these features that are close to the formalists heart. The formalist then, is interested only in some of the aesthetic features of a work of art and believes that these are the only sources of artistic value.

The category of relevance in Hermerén's list of dimensions of artistic value also contains rather heterogenous things. Here belong »ideas with more or less obvious moral, political and religious overtones«⁶¹ he says, and if we are interested in answering questions pertaining to the relevance of a work of art, we typically ask ourselves to what extent the work in questions says or reveals something important and significant about some aspect of reality. Formalists often explicitly deny that the artistic value of a work of art depends in any way on the relevance of the work. However, even avowed formalists find it difficult to avoid the issue of relevance altogether.

Roger Fry wrote the following remarkable passage where he clearly speaks of something that cannot be subsumed under the concept of aesthetic or formal value:

*/The emotional tone /of a work of art/ is not due to any recognizable reminiscence or suggestion of the emotional experiences of life; but I sometimes wonder if it nevertheless does not get its force from arousing some very deep, very vague, and immensely generalized reminiscences. It looks as though art had got access to the substratum of all the emotional colours of life, to something which underlies all the particular and specialized emotions of actual life.*⁶²

We may compare this with the position of a formalist of a very different complexion, Viktor Shklovsky, who in his famous essay »Art as Technique« (1917) claims that the purpose of literature as of all art is to reawaken our sense of reality, to make us see reality anew and to help us to break away from conventional ways of seeing an feeling. This is achieved, Shklovsky thinks, through certain formal and defamiliarizing techniques. Now his view of the purpose of art may be unduly narrow, but his brand of formalism explicitly affirmed the relevance of art to life.

3. Conclusion

It is as crippling to champion just one artistic value as it is illusiory to believe that form in the arts is always one and the same thing. There are many

60. *Ibid.*, p. 65.

61. *Ibid.*, p. 66.

62. Fry, p. 19.

concepts and conceptions of form. We can certainly create a more or less precise concept of form which can be useful for certain purposes, but to believe that we can find the concept of form rests on an illusion. So a pluralist account of form is combined with a pluralist view of artistic value.

In contrast to Fry and Shklovsky and a host of other formalists and non-formalists I don't believe art has a purpose, it has many different purposes. But one important purpose of art is to say something about reality and hence I think relevance is an important, though not the only, source of artistic value.

What a work of art says about reality and how it says it is mostly inexpressible. As Wittgenstein once wrote about a poem by the German poet Ludwig Uhland: »And this is how it is: if only you do not try to express what is inexpressible then nothing gets lost. But the inexpressible will be – inexpressibly – contained in what has been expressed.«⁶³

If works of art could say nothing about life and reality, art would be irrelevant to our deepest concerns as human beings and if what a work of art says could be conveyed discursively, art would be superfluous. In this sense both form and content are necessary and inseparable.

63. P. Engelmann, *Letters from Wittgenstein*, Blackwell, Oxford 1967, p. 7.